

**Static Films and Moving Pictures.
Montage in Avant-Garde Photography and Film.**

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ABSTRACT

Photomontage has more to do with film than with any other art form - they have in common the technique of montage. (Sergei Tretyakov)

By considering that photomontage and film use the technique of cutting and gluing as dominant artistic device, and that montage, a technique unifying art and technology for the first time, emerged as a dominant artistic feature of the avant-garde, this thesis will explore the ideological and perceptual implications of its advent in avant-garde art and film. The technological advances of the beginning of the twentieth century, and particularly the advent of photography, allowed avant-garde artists to break free from traditional concepts of artistic production – they dispensed with the old criteria of uniqueness, originality, handicraft and personal style. At a time when many avant-garde artists abruptly ceased to paint, photomontage emerged as the privileged locus for a caesura with traditional art forms. Photomontage envisioned film aesthetics insofar as it combines and juxtaposes images of various perspectival planes and angles (Raoul Hausmann described his early photomontages as “motionless moving pictures”). A corresponding observation can be made on the use of montage in cinema, a technique which crucially underpins the illusion of movement created through the succession of photographic stills. The present thesis will investigate photomontage and film in order to examine the effect technological reproduction played in revolutionising artistic production, perception and ideology – where the technique and philosophy of montage was key.

I hereby declare having composed this thesis and that the present work is my own.
This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or professional
qualification.

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'Jennifer Valcke', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jennifer Valcke
30th May 2008

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INTRODUCTION

Montage as Principle

Peter Bürger, whose *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984) has moulded our perception of avant-garde art practices for the past three decades, recognises the significance of theorising montage because “without the avant-gardist notion of montage numerous realms of contemporary aesthetic experience would be inaccessible”.¹ This statement makes it all the more surprising that so little writing can be found on “montage as principle” and the present thesis will attempt to remedy this. Bürger crucially underpinned the importance of montage – the dominant artistic principle of the avant-garde – and understanding its aims and achievements is clearly necessary for the better cognition of contemporaneous art production. Montage has traditionally been analysed according to which medium is used – photography, film, painting – and has not been extensively and systematically investigated comparatively. Since montage, simply seen as an act of *cutting* and *gluing*, is inherent to both photography and film and since the Soviet montage school has provided us with an integrating framework and a set of categories from which to initiate an investigation, the scope of this thesis will be restricted to these two mediums. It is evident that montage as structuring principle needs to be approached in an interdisciplinary fashion.

The vastness of the subject at hand immediately appears as a major challenge. The term montage has been used to refer to the formal principle at work in many of the most distinctive cultural products of the early decades of the twentieth century: the hybrid Dada images of George Grosz, John Heartfield, Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausman; the fragmented literary narratives of Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* and Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz*; the cinematic editing techniques of Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein, and Walter Ruttmann; the episodic theatrical structure of Edwin Piscator’s *Trots Alledam*; the multilayered exhibition spaces conceived by Frederik Kiesler, El Lissitzky, and Herbert Bayer; and the multiple exposure photographs of Edward Steichen and Barbara Morgan.

This thesis does not claim to present a comprehensive survey of the myriad uses of montage devices. Rather, it will concentrate on the study of photographic and cinematic montage and limit its scope to works produced in Europe, Russia and America between 1919 and 1939. Why these two art forms? The relationship that exists between them is of crucial importance for the understanding of avant-garde art in

¹ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.22.

general: the invention of photomontage by the Berlin Dadaists marked the point where technological reproduction became a recognised, integral part of artistic production. The emphasis will thus be placed on the aesthetic principles behind the photographic and cinematic endeavours which abounded in the first decades of the twentieth century. This thesis will look at montage practice between the two World Wars in an attempt to suggest the complexity of relations between art, mass media and everyday life. In doing so, the present thesis will also set out to explore the following hypothesis: that for much of the first half of the twentieth century, montage served not only as an innovative artistic technique but functioned, too, as a kind of symbolic form, providing a shared visual idiom that, more than any other, expressed the tumultuous arrival of a fully urbanised and industrialised culture.

Montage is the aesthetic practice of combination, repetition and overlap, which links the worlds of art, design and film. Works constructed using the montage principle suggest a new way of seeing – not just a new way of sighting such traditional subjects as the figure, the urban locale, or the domestic space – but a new way of perceiving culture. Cubists also inserted materials, mostly painted materials imitating newspaper headlines or even chair caning, into their paintings, while Dadaists incorporated actual cut-out photographic material. It is by placing advertising copy alongside fine art photographs and newspapers beside film posters that the complicated relations between the creation, production and utilisation of images are revealed. Through images that at times integrate text, often conjure unreal space, and always incorporate a degree of narrative breakdown, the present thesis invokes the discontinuous and the ruptured as the talisman of the twentieth century. Through the description of images with radical distortions of scale, miniaturism and jarring incorporation of text, the thesis will argue that “montage as principle” sought not merely to represent the real – as Cubism did through the integration of new material – but, also, to extend the idea of the real to something not yet seen. Montage offers a kaleidoscopic expanded vision which, by collapsing many views into one, suggests an experience of unfolding time. In effect, montage replaces the image of a continuous life glimpsed through a window frame – the heritage of the fine arts since the Renaissance – with an image, or set of re-assembled images, that reflect a fast-paced, multifaceted reality seamlessly suited to a synthesis of twentieth century documentary, desire and utopian idealism.

Montage is a term that designates the new technical procedure which arose at the beginning of the twentieth century, involving novel materials put together by artists who had acquired a new self-understanding of their role. Montage marks the point

where technology entered the realm of art, where photography became an integral part of the work of art. The technique developed by the Dadaists allowed them to incorporate the new material of photography into their art work, which they now called “photomontage”. They thus dispensed with the old criteria of uniqueness, originality, handicraft, and personal style. The Dadaists truly revolutionised traditional concepts of artistic production and this also altered the artist’s role, they began seeing themselves as engineers, as Hannah Höch explained: the main aim of photomontage was “to integrate objects from the world of machines and industry into the world of art”.² In the same vein, Raoul Hausmann added: “We called this process photomontage because it embodied our refusal to play the part of the artist. We regarded ourselves as engineers, and our work as construction: we *assembled* [in French: *monter*] our work, like a fitter”.³ This quote is of particular importance – and will be returned to in Chapter 1 – since it emphasises the interpenetration of art and technology which, in turn, revolutionised the functions of art: art was now able to depart from the realm of conventional beautiful semblance, which had previously been taken as the only sphere where it could thrive.

The technique of montage experienced a particularly brilliant expansion during the first decades of the twentieth century, as much in the visual arts, photomontage, cinema, poetry, novels (Breton, Dos Passos and Döblin) as in the theatre – in its literary forms (Tzara, Vitrac, Litmontage, Brecht), as well as in its scenic ones (Meyerhold, Eisenstein, Piscator). Experimental researchers proliferated in all forms of artistic practice. Experiments in painting, in particular, affected the arts of photomontage and film. Indeed, nearly all avant-garde experimentation with photomontage and film was carried out by painters (George Grosz and Walter Ruttmann), as well as artists who were fully aware of contemporary pictorial issues (Man Ray and René Clair). Cubist and Futurist compositional elements, used to convey dynamically motoristic movements, were developed further. Their technique of depicting motion through the superimposition of successive images lies at the heart of photomontage and film. Montage takes over composition and visual organisation and centres on disparity, disintegration, disorganisation and heterogeneity. Although montage in photography and film truly became the quintessential structural principle used by the avant-gardes, the source of its inception in both media is very different as we shall see in the following sections.

² Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 28.

³ Hans Richter, *Dada Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), p.118.

The Origins of Photomontage

The art of photomontage could be said to have started just after the First World War with the Berlin Dadaists, but the manipulation of photographs already had a history going back to the invention of photography in the mid-19th century. Since its inception the photographic medium has always encouraged experimentation: firstly because of its reproducible character, and secondly because it is hyper realistic and mimetic – a trait which artists have distorted in order to conjure up new realities. Direct-contact printing of objects placed on photographic plates, double exposures, and composite pictures made by darkroom masking were all popular during the Victorian era. During 1834 and 1835, William Fox Talbot devised a process based on the light sensitivity of silver salts that allowed him to develop the direct contact printing of objects – mostly ferns, leaves, lace and drawings – onto photographic plates. In the 1920s, a new wave of artists such as Christian Schad, Man Ray and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy rediscovered this technique and took it onto another artistic level. Indeed, Talbot's pictures, which he called *photogenic drawings*, contained the seed of modern photography and inspired the production of photograms – camera-originated negatives and positive prints from negatives of engravings.

Besides this practical use of combination photography – double exposures, double printing and composite photographs – Victorians discovered the amusement to be had from postcards of the wrong head stuck on a different body, or the creation of strange or impossible creatures. The Englishman Francis Galton used photography to construct physiognomic types. Taking the technique further, Galton's *Inquiries into Human Faculty*, first published in 1883, included composite photographs made by precisely-aligned multiple exposures of individuals such as criminals or consumptives. Highly influential, Galton's work touched many responsive chords: it fed directly into the literary and painterly tradition of the picturesque type – a subject stripped of limiting details to reveal its universal characteristics of class or profession – and exploited racial and cultural stereotypes. Numerous composite photographic portraits appeared in the 1890s as this became a form of entertainment with newspapers. Trick photography thus became extremely popular – comic postcards, photograph albums, screens, military mementoes all made use of the techniques of cutting out and reassembling photographic images.

Even with an art form as young as photography, there were the purists who regarded composite works as illegitimate: the French Photographic Society banned them from their exhibitions. Despite this opposition, many good examples of complex

combination printing have survived, often with “high art” themes. Oscar Gustave Rejlander thought of photography in its relation to painting “as an aid to [the painter’s] art, not only in details but in preparing what may be regarded as a most perfect sketch of [his] composition”.⁴ The dramatic dimensions (78.7 cm x 40.6 cm) of his 1857 *The Two Ways of Life* (Fig. 1) as well as its complex composition are clearly in tune with the *tableaux vivants* of classical academic painting. It depicts a sage guiding two young men towards manhood. One looks with some eagerness towards gambling, wine, prostitution and idling, whilst the other looks towards figures representing religion, industry, family and charitable works. In the centre appears the veiled, partly clothed figure symbolising repentance and turning towards the good. Rejlander took close to six weeks to complete this image, easily composed of thirty different negatives. His method allowed him to associate various elements by photographing each component in isolation and then assembling them onto the same sensitive sheet of paper. He prepared a negative for each element of the composition and camouflaged portions that were not a part of the final work with black velvet. By contact, he then exposed his light sensitive paper successively under each negative. This method of masking unexposed areas by pieces of black velvet foreshadowed the precise realism of political photomontage; John Heartfield, for example, employed professional photographers to seamlessly blend his ideas in the darkroom. Other types of early composite images were produced by a more primitive “cut and paste” technique, and the final picture then re-photographed, an approach to montage that has persisted ever since, and still finds favour with contemporary montage artists such as Sean Hillen.

Often the spur to produce such unconventional, rule-breaking work was a chance “mistake”. In the early days of collodion plates, before the invention of photographic paper, the plates were reused, and had to be thoroughly cleaned between exposures. If this was not carried out properly, a double exposure would result, sometimes ruining a careful composition, but occasionally producing a chance work of art – a concept subsequently taken up by Dada and Surrealist artists. According to Dawn Ades in her book entitled *Photomontage* (1984), the making of composite photographs in Victorian times also resulted from the technical deficiencies of the materials available.

⁴ Dawn Ades, *Photomontage* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1986); p.7.



Fig. 1 *The Two Ways of Life*, Oscar Rejlander, 1857



Fig. 2 *Fading Away*, Henry Peach Robinson, 1858

Landscape photographers would find that it was possible to have either the land or the sky properly exposed, but not both simultaneously, so the practice of taking two exposures and combining them in the darkroom became common. John Morrissey, for example, cut out, pasted together and re-photographed reproductions of pictures from *American Photography* and placed them against a specially-prepared background. The limitations of photography also led Henry Peach Robinson to perfect the idea of combination printing, for which he is particularly remembered; it is possible that he was first introduced to this technique by Rejlander. The technical difficulty of portraying sky as well as subject on the same negative caused him to accumulate a stock of negatives of the sky, to be incorporated into his works. Perhaps his most famous picture is *Fading Away* from 1858 (Fig. 2), a composition of five negatives, in which he depicts a girl dying of consumption. Nowadays we have developed graduated filters to overcome the problems of exposure, but out of these combination prints that represented an initial solution, photomontage, as we know it, emerged. The use of montage in cinema followed the same pattern of evolution: it was first used by Griffith and other early filmmakers as a means to create a continuity of sorts between shots, and later adapted by the Russians to create complex compositions and engage the viewer in a quest for meaning.

Griffith and Proto-Montage

As mentioned previously, since *cutting* and *gluing* are inherently part of the photographic and filmic mediums montage can be seen as a basic operation in cinema. Interpreted this way montage is the technical feature which enabled “primitive” cinema forms to become more complex; since before its advent films were shot using first, uncut single reels. If montage in film is solely regarded as this simple gluing technique, that which unites in a utilitarian fashion two reels, two tableaux or allows the insertion of an inter-title; montage has thus existed since there has been a need for shots to be glued together in order to ensure a certain continuity. What is at stake here is montage as the basic means of expression of cinema, montage as creation and meaning. Traditional film criticism tends to attribute the paternity of montage to the American David Wark Griffith. Arthur Knight describes him as “the father of film technique”⁵ and Lewis Jacobs recognises Griffith’s considerable influence on Soviet filmmakers. Eisenstein also recognises his importance, in his article “Dickens, Griffith and

⁵ Arthur Knight, *The Liveliest Art: A Panoramic History of the Movies* (MacMillan: New York, 1957); p. 31.

Ourselves”, he calls Griffith “the wizard of tempo and montage”.⁶ Art in filmmaking arose from the manipulation of what the Russians saw as the raw and mechanical images of photography to which little intrinsic artistry could be attached. According to Scott Simmon: “It was from [Griffith’s] use of close-ups, intercuts, visual manipulation of images to effect ideas that the Russians developed their theories of montage which were in turn to become the very foundation of artistic filmmaking”.⁷ Here is a reiteration that Griffith’s was a school of tempo, while the Russians’ was a school of rhythm. Griffith used switchback for purposes of suspense and tension, Eisenstein used montage for purposes of collision and juxtaposition, to create meaning.

Russian filmmakers are the first to have used the technique of montage as artistic device as well as the first to have compiled a theory for it. They were the first to use montage in order to create a multi-perspectival arrangement of shots, to compose a fragmentary space made up of various pieces of material. For his part, Griffith developed a number of cinematic techniques and lists them in a 1913 advertisement in *The New York Dramatic Mirror*: “The large or close-up figures [...] the “switchback”, sustained suspense”.⁸ Griffith named his technique switchback or crosscutting, and used it solely for the purposes of heightening suspense and maintaining continuity, for a traditional build-up of tension. He had not discovered montage as used by the avant-gardes; he did not use montage for artistic purposes, contrary to how it features in photomontage, for example. For Griffith, montage was a means to develop parallel action, as is here described by Eisenstein:

Griffith approached [montage] through the device of parallel action and, essentially, he progressed no further, making it possible for film-makers from the other half of the globe, from another epoch and with a different class structure, to perfect the matter definitively.⁹

To see Griffith as the “inventor” of montage thus becomes doubtful. He should more adequately be described as an intuitive experimenter of cinematic narration. Griffith was a pragmatic man driven to experimentation because of a primary need for storytelling. The Soviet filmmakers on the contrary were theorists. Notwithstanding the inevitable divergences, all their theoretical texts unanimously celebrate, not without excess, what they consider to be the central nerve of cinematic language: montage. The Russians took up Griffith’s heritage, radicalised it, perfected it, systematised it and,

⁶ Sergei Eisenstein, “Dickens, Griffith and Ourselves” in *Selected Works: Volume 3: Writings, 1934-47* (British Film Institute: London, 1996); p.196.

⁷ Scott Simmon, *The Films of D.W. Griffith* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1993); p.18.

⁸ Cited in Simmon, op.cit.; ibidem

⁹ Eisenstein, op.cit.; p.199.

according to Eisenstein, elaborated a sophisticated theory of montage “which owed its full development, definitive interpretation and world recognition to [Russian] cinema”.¹⁰ He goes on to state: “Griffith’s role was colossal, but our cinema is neither his poor relative nor his insolvent debtor”.¹¹

When reality (imaginary or taken from living reality) is conceived as a succession or multiplicity of viewpoints shot from afar or from close-up – that is, when an event is considered from near or from afar, from the left or from the right, from higher up or from lower down – then the notion of shot superseded that of the tableau. Three consequences arose from this: an impression of spatial dimension was created; a temporal relation between the shots was thus borne generating an impression of rhythm; these shots and viewpoints created meaning among themselves. Meaning does not occur in a single temporal fragment, since reality is not morselled in small successive shots. It is precisely the succession of fragments that, in turn, produce new meaning between the elements reported in this way. Montage is neither a “natural” phenomenon, nor the fruit of a sudden revelation, but the result of a dialectic, often erratic, evolution playing with both the formal experimentation of a few filmmakers and the slowly maturing gaze of the spectators. Montage is a creative process, a way of thinking, a way of conceiving art through the association of images, but it also is a revolution for the gaze. The next section will survey what forms constituted the first examples of montage and what terms were coined to describe them.

Towards a Definition of Collage/Montage/Photomontage/Assemblage

Thus far, in setting the historical and theoretical stage for the growth of montage and its criticism, the terms montage, and photomontage have been used without differentiating among the variety of montage forms – which also comprise collage and assemblage. Before proceeding further it seems important to briefly make such distinctions. The French word *collage*, from the verb *coller*, means “pasting, sticking, or gluing” onto a surface, for example, the application of wallpaper. *Papier collé* is somewhat a narrower form of collage referring only to the use of paper, and often referring to the paper collages of the Cubists. Braque is usually credited with the innovation of *papier collé*, or pasted paper, in modern art; while Picasso is usually recognised as the first modern artists to use collage in his *Still Life With Chair Caning* (1911-12) – using extraneous objects stuck to the canvas surface. Picasso introduced

¹⁰ Eisenstein, op.cit.; ibidem.

¹¹ Eisenstein, op.cit.; p. 222.

metonymic reality literally and physically into his painting. The conceptual nature of collage was thus born.

The term *assemblage*, associated with collage, refers in French and English to “the fitting together of parts and pieces”, and has been applied to both two- and three-dimensional forms. The concept may include all forms of composite art and processes of juxtaposition.

The term *photomontage*, the assembly of photographs by pasting or other means, refers particularly to the use of photographs in montages by Dadaists, Surrealists and Constructivists, beginning early in the twentieth century. The word was derived from the German verb *montieren*, similar to the English verb “to assemble”. The term montage and variations on it have also been used in relation to film, particularly by Sergei Eisenstein, in *The Film Sense* (1942). There he refers to metric, rhythmic, tonal, overtone, and intellectual montage.

The wide artistic interest awakened by the Cubist collage techniques pioneered by Picasso and Braque around 1912, as well as the influential adaptations of collage by the Italian Futurists and the early Russian avant-gardists, should be seen as crucial sources for the subsequent development of photomontage. One result of this mixed ancestry of photomontage has been a lasting confusion of terminology, with attempts to make general formal distinctions between *papier collé*, *Klebebild*, *Fotoklebebild*, *Wirklichkeitsausschnitt*, *photocollage*, and *photomontage* yielding little in the way of helpful clarification.¹²

For the purpose of this thesis, a more useful starting point is that provided by the German art historian Franz Roh in 1925. Roh described montage as a precarious synthesis of the two most important tendencies in modern visual culture – extreme fantasy or extreme sobriety – or, put another way, the realism of the photographic fragment and the pictorial techniques of modernist abstraction.¹³ Equally helpful in beginning to approach the perhaps daunting assortment of montage material presented here is the definition of photomontage advanced in the 1930s by the Soviet critic Sergei Tretyakov.¹⁴ Writing about Heartfield, Tretyakov proposed that photomontage begins whenever there is a conscious alteration of the immediate meaning of a

¹² See, for example, Richard Hiepe’s essay in the catalogue, *Die Fotomontagen: Geschichten und Wesen einer Kunstform* (Ingolstadt: Kunstverein Ingolstadt, 1969), and Charlotte Irene Lusk, *Montagen in Blaue: László Moholy-Nagy; Fotomontagen und Collagen, 1922-1943* (Giessen: Anabas Verlag, 1980); pp 13-17.

¹³ Franz Roh, *Nachexpressionismus* (Liepzig: Klinckschmidt und Biermann, 1925); pp 45-46.

¹⁴ Tretyakov is mentioned in John Heartfield, *Photomontages of the Nazi Period* (Universe Books: London, 1977); p. 26.

photograph – by combining two or more images, by joining drawing and graphic shapes to the photograph, by adding a significant spot of colour, or by adding a written text. All of these techniques serve to divert the photograph from what it “naturally” seems to say, and to underscore the need for the viewer’s active “reading” of the image.

Gustav Klucis manifested a very strong interest for the technique of photomontage from the early 1920s on, when he worked extensively on the design of posters. His claim for photomontage rests on its potential for political effectiveness and for realism.¹⁵ In 1931 a text of his was published in *Literatura i iskusstvo* which describes and defines photomontage. It seemed important here to include the whole text as it provides a very clear indication of the issues of content, both in formal and political terms:

The method of photomontage is divided into two organically related processes: 1) the preparation of the individual elements (the photomechanical processes); 2) the process of montage itself (combination and organization of the elements).

To ensure the utmost activation of the materials photomontage employs the following principles for the organization of its materials (montage): a) use of different scales (with the aim of heightening the impact of the work and replacing the traditional and restrictive use of perspective) which itself offers very significant compositional possibilities; b) use of highly contrasting colours and forms; c) activation through liberated placement of elements (cutting them out from the passive background and actively colouring them; employing extreme contrasts of chromatic and achromatic colour).

Klucis enlightens us as to the logic of the photomontage form and offers a very compelling analysis of the characteristics that make photomontage a distinctive form of communication: the alteration of meaning produced by intervention. He goes on:

[...] The photograph fixes a static moment, an isolated shot. Photomontage visualizes the dialectical unfolding of a theme of a given subject, the dialectical unity between political slogan and representation. Photography and the photograph are technical means for creating a representational form, they constitute documentary material but they are not ends in themselves. Like any other art, photomontage solves the problem of so-called pictoriality by presenting the manifold and interrelated character of reality, by revealing the concrete manifestations of the constructive socialist project precisely through the combination of elements (the method of photomontage).

[...] Photomontage is not a form but a method [...] a method that does not start from form, but from the conditions that determine all form: the task

¹⁵ Klucis remained faithful to the Communist Party and to the aims of the Revolution.

specific to the individual poster (or book, etc.), the broad mass for whom the individual work is intended, the relevant location (square, feet, window display, department store), the processes of mass production (printing techniques).

Each work is treated in a different manner in accordance with the specific conditions of the individual concrete case. By its very essence, the technique of photomontage resists canonization and excludes the clichés of aesthetic convention. Its fundamental aim is to foreground the given phenomena in a dialectical manner, i.e. in their relationship to other forms and according to their significance for further development.¹⁶

Photomontage is here portrayed as having the potential for a striking and powerfully agitational impact drawing its effectiveness from the unexpected combination of heterogeneous and isolated reality fragments torn from their context. So far it has been shown that montage, in all its forms (photographic, filmic, literary, etc.), has had an enormous impact on how we perceive and respond to the world around us. As society has become increasingly modernised, so too has vision become progressively fractured, and artists have constructed their own visual and/or virtual realities. By looking at the origins of montage, twentieth-century strategies of Dadaist, Surrealist, Constructivist photomontage, and Western and Eastern European filmic montage the present work will explore how artists, filmmakers and graphic designers have used montage in order to provoke an active response on the part of the observer.

Montage as Ideology

The fact that photomontage and cinema will remain a privileged field of research has driven the framework of this thesis to historicise the technique of montage while

¹⁶ These excerpts were taken from Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds) *Art in Theory 1900 – 2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Blackwell Publishing: London, 2003); pp 489-491. It is worth mentioning that by the time this text was written Klucis's modernism rendered him suspect in the eyes of a regime growing increasingly hostile to the avant-garde tradition. An editorial comment was added to the text on the occasion of its original publication (also added in *Art in Theory*, p.491), which notes both the artist's implication in the October group and his apparently "formalist" sympathies. Klucis was arrested during World War II and died in Siberia. The comment went as follows: "The Section office of the Spatial Arts of the LIJA [Institute of Literature, Art and Language] in the Communist Academy believes that comrade Klucis's extended discussion of the problem of photomontage, strongly emphasizing the importance of this visual art, was extremely timely and is generally correct. But we should add that the Section Office considers some of the hypotheses advanced in the discussion paper as incorrect and regards them as unreflective remnants of the artistic principle of the "October" group to which Klucis earlier belonged; i.e. the analysis of the specific character of photomontage, which the author singles out as the most important art at the expense of all the others, and, finally an insufficiently critical attitude towards the early, perceptibly formalist products of photomontage in particular."

rooting it within the ideological, literary and theoretical debate that surrounded its elaboration. Since the complexity and heterogeneity of montage practices introduced is too vast to subsume under a single theoretical viewpoint, the present thesis will attempt to demonstrate in a montage-like dynamic oscillation – moving from the historical context to the analytical – that such a multiplicity of perspectives is productive when analysing a wide variety of photographic and filmic works.

The development of montage took place within the framework of a vast ideological literary and theoretical debate between Walter Benjamin, Bertold Brecht, Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukàcs, Boris Arvatov and Sergei Tretyakov. Their ideological considerations were complex, profound and lively. In this debate, the artistic process was understood as susceptible of rendering a new treatment of reality, a new way of grasping its components, oppositions and contradictions, a new way of showing them and thus acting upon them. This thesis will not adopt a single method of analysis but rather its approaches will be as multiple as its perspectives: technical, aesthetic, sociological and ideological. Montage will thus be analysed through its usage in photomontage and film; through its structure; through the materials it assembles; in the way it unfolds in space and time; the relations and tensions that are borne out of the confrontation of *éléments montés*. The expected effect that montage has upon the spectator will also be studied, whether it is a conscious or chance effect. More importantly, the present thesis will attempt to map out the extent to which the technique of montage has provoked the emergence of new art forms, of new artistic structures. Its aim is thus threefold: to consider the scope of montage in photography, dealing with the treatment of photomontage by Berlin Dadaists, Russian Constructivists, Bauhaus artists, and Surrealists; to look at montage in cinema through avant-garde film (by artists such as Walter Ruttmann, Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling, Man Ray, and Marcel Duchamp), the work of Sergei Eisenstein (adapting photomontage techniques among others into the filmic mode) and through the perception of the city as an object incorporated into montage (in *Berlin Symphony of a Great City*, *Man With the Movie Camera*, and *A Propos de Nice*); and finally to address the theoretical debate about *Gestaltung* and montage which burst forth within the German intelligentsia represented by Benjamin, Bloch, Brecht and Lukàcs; and within the Russian circles in particular with Arvatov and Tretyakov. It is hoped that the resonances borne out of the investigation of the photographic and filmic practices will lead to the better understanding of a montage principle and ultimately to a better understanding of avant-garde art.

CHAPTER ONE: Berlin Dada and Early Photomontage

As mentioned in the previous chapter, photomontage as developed by the Berlin Dadaists marks the point where technological reproduction became a recognised, integral part of artistic production. Indeed, Dada marks a rupture with the previously accepted canons of uniqueness, originality, handicraft, and personal style. Dadaists envisaged art as embedded in its epoch – this explains their use of new materials in order to reflect and reveal the surrounding “cultural situation”.¹ What the Dadaists referred to as the photomontage was to them the logical place to begin the formation of a new language and myth.² As had the *Die Brücke* artists, the Cubists, the Futurists, and numerous other avant-garde groups, the Dadaists worked profusely, creating their own testing ground in which their art works were developed. Until several months after the first official Dada exhibition was held in Israel Neumann’s *Graphisches Kabinett* in May 1919, there were two distinct entities which dominated the Dada scene. The first comprised of the association between George Grosz and John Heartfield while the second was represented by Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch. Scholars have often tried to characterise Grosz and Heartfield as the “political” wing of the movement while Hausmann and Höch were designated the “aesthetic” Dadaists. The Dadaists’ own promotion of their fictional personas (Hausmann the Dadasoph, Grosz the Dadamarshal, and Heartfield the Dadamonteur) suggests that their associations with one another were based in part on their desire to promote the extremes of political or aesthetic radicalism dominating the Berlin Dada circle.

It is difficult to talk about Dada “in general”. The movement consisted of a scattering of specific groups (Zurich Dada, New York Dada, Berlin Dada, Hannover Dada, Cologne Dada, and Paris Dada). It was extremely short-lived, defying all attempts to define it or ascribe it precise meaning. As Hausmann said in 1921, “Dada is more than Dada”. The movement

¹ In 1918 in Berlin, Richard Huelsenbeck expressed this idea in the Dada Manifesto: “Art in its execution and orientation depends on the time in which it lives – and artists are also the product of their epoch. The greatest art form will be that whose moral content presents the multiple problems of its time, who will let itself be shaken by last week’s explosion, and who will continually strive to rebuild itself following yesterday’s shock. The best artists and strangest artists are those who, at all times, tear and reassemble the shreds of their bodies from the chaos of life’s cataracts; and those who eagerly seize, with bleeding hands and bleeding hearts, the intellect of their epoch.” My translation of Raoul Hausmann, *Raoul Hausmann, 1886-1971. Exposition du 2 octobre au 7 décembre 1986*, (Musée départemental de Rochechouart: Rochechouart, 1986); p.67.

² Roland Barthes’ analysis of myth is of great relevance here. Published in 1957, *Mythologies* considers how myth associated with everyday objects and situations are presented in social and cultural values as deceptively natural (see Roland Barthes, *Image – Music – Text* (London: Fontana, 1982), p.167). Barthes’ process of mythification bears strong parallels to Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura (see “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in: Benjamin, *Illuminations* (Fontana: New York, 1968), 211-244, p.240). As Benjamin Buchloh writes: “Barthes’ strategy of secondary mythification repeats the semiotic and linguistic devaluation of primary language by myth and structurally follows Benjamin’s ideas on the allegorical procedure that reiterates the devaluation of the object by commodification” (see “Allegorical Procedure: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art”, *Artforum*, volume 11, number 1 (September 1982), 43-56).

covered a wide range of different intentions. Meetings were loosely structured to minimise misunderstandings, but still there were constant, serious conflicts. Certain artists, like Hans Arp, Tristan Tzara and Hans Richter, chose Dada because it allowed them to synthesise creativity and derision. Others, like Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, found in Dada the basis of a nihilistic art. And yet more, like Grosz and Heartfield, combined mockery, revolt, violence and radical political engagement.

Dada wanted to give expression to modern life – to its noises, its rhythms, its mechanical character, its lack of meaning, its absurdity and the simultaneity of images and sounds. Along with Futurism, Dada was fascinated by the speed, chaos and violence of an Americanised world (Johannes Herzfelde was so enamoured with America that he changed his name to John Heartfield). With Cubism, Dada shared the will to translate visual multiplicity into reality. To achieve this, there had to be a renewal of artistic practice. Perhaps, in 1918, painting still seemed a viable source of “new material”. Soon afterwards, photomontage, collage, film, posters, phonetic and bruitist poems became the unassailable new means of expression. The Dadaists had initially targeted the academicism of Expressionism in particular, but they were eventually forced to realise that painting epitomised classical art and ended up rejecting this art form as a whole.

The contention of this chapter is to survey the social and political context in which the first photomontages appeared, present the main protagonists involved in using this new medium, as well as describe the aesthetics involved in the construction of photomontage. The implications of such practices should lead to a re-thinking and a re-assessment of photomontage as it is portrayed in the existing literature.

Photomontage as New “Principle” of Structure

Dadaists placed their highest hopes in photomontage. Whatever the technique used – the montage of painted, graphic, typographic and photographic elements; the montage of photographic parts only, accompanied or not by captions – opened up the photomonteurs’ possibilities by shattering the representation of reality, revealing it in fragments. They could now play on the explosion of space, a sort of static cinema; on the multiplication of perspectives, scales and styles within a common ensemble and; above all, on the dialectical and provoking opposition of form, structure, images and meanings. In this respect, Hausmann’s *The Art Critic* (Fig. 3) and *ABCD* (Fig. 4) are particularly representative. Hausmann also claimed:

Photomonteurs and Dadaists alike disagreed with the viewpoint, which they thought was unwavering, that wartime painting represented by post-Futurist Expressionism had failed because of its non-objectivity, its lack of commitment and its conceptual void; and that not only painting, but all genres and all

techniques, needed a radical transformation in order to relate to the life of the time.

Photomontage offers the widest range of techniques and constitutes the most elaborate dialectic of forms.

We can state that photomontage, and photography as much as silent cinema, contribute in various and unpredictable ways to our knowledge of optical, psychological and social structures – through the clarity of its means where content and form, meaning and its interpretation intermingle and cannot be dissociated.³

This said, it is true that there is not a single and unique style of photomontage, but a plurality of styles which correspond to the ways in which the various artistic personalities manipulated the medium. For Hausmann and Höch, the political denunciation of the bourgeoisie calls for a kind of satirical spontaneity as a reflection of the world's destruction through the shattered forms it projects. This satire did not exclude a certain form of narcissism typical of Dada which sometimes became a game in itself. Interpreting the photomontages of Hausmann or Höch is not an easy task; one must hold certain keys in order to access their meaning. Beyond the formal qualities of a great number of photomontages, they often offer provocation verging on the joke – an art form accessible only to the initiated. Höch and Hausmann, along with George Grosz, signed an open letter to the Novembergruppe where they stated: “We must be the expression of the creative forces, the instrument of the necessities of our time and its masses, and we negate any lineage to those traffickers and academics of tomorrow. Adhesion to the Revolution, to the new community is not a purely verbal creed; we have seriously undertaken what we consider to be our task: collaborate to the construction of a new human community, the community of workers”.⁴ There seems to be some discrepancy between the work of the photomonteurs and their political position. This did not apply to all the photomonteurs of the Berlin circle, since John Heartfield produced political works exclusively from 1929 onwards: his political opinion fuelled his artistic work and conversely. Heartfield privileged simple photographic constructions meticulously accompanied by captions that would shock audiences into political awareness. Hausmann, on the other hand, privileged texture and spontaneity assembled in complex visual compositions. Hausmann's works are not as accessible as Heartfield's. In his article “Definition der Foto-Montage”,⁵ Hausmann seems to pin down the power of photomontage: “[...] its contrast of structure and dimension, rough against smooth, aerial photograph against close-up, perspective against flat surface, the utmost technical flexibility and the most lucid formal dialectics are equally possible [...] The ability to manage the most striking contrasts, to the achievement of perfect

³ My translation of Michel Giroud and Sabine Wolf (eds); *Projectoires 1, Documents Raoul Hausman* (Champ Libre: Paris, 1975); p.18.

⁴ Giroud and Wolf, op.cit.; p.14.

⁵ Raoul Hausmann's famous definition is quoted in Hans Richter, *Dada Art and Anti-Art* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1965); p.116.



Fig. 3 *The Art Critic*, Raoul Hausmann, 1919-20



Fig. 4 *ABCD*, Raoul Hausmann, 1923-24

states of equilibrium [...] ensures the medium a long and richly productive span of life [...]" Hausmann's montages were some of the most radical of the early period of Dada, demonstrating his somewhat wild and free personality and lack of inhibition. He was not a purist and often combined media, using paint extensively in some of his best works. Still they remained montages as a result of the philosophical approach that he took to the making of art; and conversely his artistic production infused his theoretical framework.

For Heartfield, on the other hand, photomontages would have to be composed according to a very strict set of parameters. He would insist that they should include a single photograph and would go to great lengths to make sure his montage appeared as seamless as possible (sometimes hiring professional photographers to do so). All his images were accompanied by captions, since text and image interacted with each other in a similar way to multiple images. Heartfield's use of captions was, and perhaps still is, unsurpassed. Many of his best works utilise famous quotes of leading Nazis, and subtly undermine the intended message by ingenious visual puns. Heartfield was the most politically committed of all the photomonteurs and transformed his art into a political weapon – *Kunst ist eine Waffe*. Indeed, Heartfield did start off composing photomontages in a style similar to Hausmann's,⁶ but as soon as he registered with the communist party he used photomontage as an instrument in the service of class struggle, capable of uncovering the capitalist system, the ruling classes, and of awakening people to the rise of Nazism. We are not dealing with isolated works, with "unique pieces", but with shock-images and document-images reproduced thousands of times, in the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* for example, and thus reaching the masses. Hans Richter, in his *Dada Art and Anti-Art* also highlights this difference in style:

Heartfield's photomontages were often classically composed; Hausmann's were loud and explosive, not contained by any aesthetic framework. Hausmann's were certainly fiercer and more uninhibited; Heartfield's were more direct. Both set standards by which their successors are still judged [...]⁷

As an important factor of the environment in which photomontage developed, this art form offers an alternative to the concentration on the medium of collage in many explanations of Dada art. In the wake of the interest in collage and assemblage in the 1960s, German scholars and historians attempted sweeping explanations of modern art in terms of a *Prinzip Collage* [collage principle], in which the Berlin Dadaists were credited with the invention of photomontage.⁸ Frequently either formal concepts – such as *formation* or *destruction* – or

⁶ See, for example, his collaborations with Grosz: *Leben und Treiben in Universal City, 12 Uhr 5 Mittags* (1919); and *Dada-Merika* (1919).

⁷ Quoted in Richter, op. cit.; p. 118.

⁸ The issue was raised in a symposium held in conjunction with an exhibition entitled *Von der Collage zur Assemblage* (exhibition catalogue, Nürnberg: Institut für moderne Kunst, 1968). For the proceedings of the symposium, see: Franz Mon and Heinz Neidel, *Prinzip Collage* (Luchterhand: Neuwied and Berlin, 1968). For criticism of this approach, see Annegret Jürgens-Kirchoff *Technik und Tendenz der Montage in der Bildenden Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Anabas-Verlag: Giessen, 1968).

cultural phenomena – such as the avant-garde – dominated the discussions.⁹ Disputes as to whether this invention was a mere technique or a principle of thought and formation often obscured the historical context as we shall see in the following section.

Certainly, the Berlin Dadaists' choice of technique did have significant consequences, especially in their acceptance of mass production. Abhorred by the Expressionists, mass production was bringing culture into the era of mechanical reproduction. This threatened the conventional meaning of images and objects by removing them from their traditional systems of meaning and their roles in religious, political and aesthetic rituals. Such a release of meaning, or negation of aura under the conditions of reproducibility, was later seen by Walter Benjamin as forecasting the melancholic attitude rehabilitated in Surrealism into a state of surprise, a profane illumination. It remains beyond any doubt that the Dadaists thought the context of photomontage was functionally related to destroying the ritualistic function of art and to establishing the conditions of mass production – Höch assembled her works, while Grosz and Heartfield manufactured products.

The Invention of Photomontage: Conflicting Histories

The advent of photomontage was foiled by innumerable disputes, inaccuracies, distortions and petty rivalries. Perhaps desiring recognition in an art world which has tended to construe the history of art as one of linear development within media categories, Grosz, Heartfield, Höch, Hausmann, Gustav Klucis¹⁰ and Paul Citroen¹¹ have all made claims to the invention of photomontage. In the dispute concerning the exact origin of the creation of this new technique lays an implicit perception of the importance of the development of photomontage for the understanding of modern art. These conflicting anecdotal accounts regarding who invented photomontage have shifted critical attention away from montage's primary function: montage expressed the search for a new formal principle in order to suggest a new way of seeing and perceiving art. Montage practices stem from this desire for a novel way to govern structure, to choose materials, to develop these elements in time and space, as well as the relations and

See also Richard Hiepe, "Zur Theorie der Photomontage" in *Die Fotomontage: Geschichte und Wesen einer Kunstform*, exhibition catalogue (Kunstverein: Ingolstadt, 1969).

⁹ See, Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1984).

¹⁰ Klucis claimed that his photomontage *Dynamic City* (1919-1920) was the first in the USSR. For a full discussion see Dawn Ades, *Photomontage* (Thames and Hudson: London 1986); pp63-67. For a more detailed description of this photomontage, see Chapter 2.

¹¹ "Citroen is quoted to have said in an unpublished text: "Blumenfeld – who later became a renowned photographer in America – also made a few Dada anti-art works. On one he stuck two houses, such as those found on old postcards, side by side. I thought: what would a sheet of paper completely covered with houses look like? The result would be a type of metropolis. And this is how my first photomontage came to be in 1919." Citroen called this work, in the new style, *Grossstadt*. And his later *Klebebilder* were also made out of streets, houses, buildings, bridges, plains and other elements taken from the big city." My translation from Karin Schippers, *Holland Dada* (Querido: Amsterdam, 1974); p.25.

tensions borne out of their conflict. Form could now be placed in context only by its opposite and by the establishment of a relationship between these two opposites in order to create a unity, an artistic whole. The dispute over the invention of photomontage between Hausmann and Grosz developed as early as 1928 with Grosz's claim:

In 1916, when Johnny Heartfield and I invented photomontage in my studio at the south end of the town at five o'clock one May morning, we had no idea of the immense possibilities, or of the thorny but successful career, that awaited the new invention.¹²

This tongue-in-cheek account was later corrected by Wieland Herzfelde, who suggested that the word "collage" would be more appropriate and hinted that Heartfield considered what he was doing to be photomontage only in the 1920s.¹³ Herzfelde's claim seems substantiated in another version of Grosz's story as recounted by Richter:

On a piece of cardboard we pasted a mishmasch [*sic*] of advertisements for hernia belts, student song-books and dog food, labels from schnapps – and wine – bottles, and photographs from picture papers, cut up at will in such a way as to say, in pictures, what would have been banned by the censors if we had said it in words. In this way we made postcards supposed to have been sent home from the Front, or from home to the Front. This led some of our friends, [Tretyakov] among them, to create the legend that photomontage was an invention of the "anonymous masses". What did happen was that Heartfield was moved to develop what started as an inflammatory political joke into a conscious artistic technique."¹⁴

Also in 1928, Jan Tschichold published his *Die Neue Typografie*,¹⁵ which gave Heartfield, who himself was claiming credit for the invention as late as 1969,¹⁶ the honour of having invented photomontage while omitting Hausmann's name altogether. Tschichold's book prompted an angry letter from Hausmann in which Johannes Baader was credited with "the first so-called *Klebebild*" [glued image] in March 1918, and Hausmann himself took credit for making the first "*tableau* made of photoclipings" at the beginning of 1919.¹⁷ While his dates are disputable, Hausmann's terminology is precisely that being used in the 1910s.¹⁸ His *Gurk* (Fig. 5) was published for the first time in *Der Dada 2* and was identified then as

¹² Hans Richter, *Dada Art and Anti-Art* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1965); p.117.

¹³ Wieland Herzfelde, "The Heartfield Case" in: Joanna Drew (ed.) *John Heartfield 1891-1968. Photomontages* (Arts Council of Great Britain: London, 1969).

¹⁴ Richter, op.cit., ibidem.

¹⁵ Jan Tschichold, *Die Neue Typographie* (Bildungsverband der deutschen Buchdrucker: Berlin, 1928). See also Tschichold's "Fotographie und Typographie", *Die Form*, number 7 (1928); pp 157-159.

¹⁶ See, for example, Jean Rollin, "Begegnung mit einem grossen antifascistischen deutschen Künstler" in *John Heartfield*, exhibition catalogue (Paris, May 1969), cited in Roland März, *Der Schnitt entlang der Zeit* (Verlag der Kunst: Dresden, 1981); p. 29.

¹⁷ Michel Giroud, *Raoul Hausmann, "Je ne suis pas un photographe"* (Éditions du Chêne: Paris, 1975); p. 42.

¹⁸ The date is variable in Hausmann's accounts. See, for example, Hausmann, *Courier Dada* (Éditions le Terrain Vague: Paris, 1958); p. 79: "En 1919 Baader commença à faire des photomontages."

photomontage. Hausmann later recounted that he adopted the pseudonym “Algernon Syndetikon” after the Syndetikon trademark of the glue he was using at the time.¹⁹

By 1930 Grosz had not only moved his date for the creation of “photo-glued-montage-experiments” up to 1915, but had also insisted that the “Grosz-Heartfield Konzern” (the Dada “company” espousing the industrialisation of culture as a gesture against bourgeois cultural institutions) was established in that year.²⁰ Grosz’s inaccuracies of dating prompted another letter from Hausmann to Tschichold asserting that Grosz, along with Höch, was still a student in Emil Orlik’s studio in 1915, and consequently could have had no association so early with photomontage – a claim seriously challenged by the existence of Höch’s 1916 collage *Weißer Wolke*.²¹ While Baader’s influence is again mentioned in his letter, Hausmann’s counterclaim, often rehearsed in the Dada literature, of having discovered photomontage during the summer of 1918 when he was on holiday with Höch in the fishing village of Heidebrink on the Baltic island of Usedom, is altogether absent and is nowhere to be found in this early phase of the dispute.²² Nonetheless Höch’s frequent allusions to these events in her reminiscences would seem to corroborate Hausmann’s story.²³

In their lodgings at Heidebrink, Hausmann and Höch are said to have noticed an artefact from popular culture that caught their attention. In his book, *Dada Art and Anti-Art*, Hans Richter describes Hannah Höch’s recollection of how photomontage came to be:

In 1917 or 1918, Hausmann and she had rented a room in Gribow, near Usedom on the Baltic, for their holidays (Hausmann says it was in Heidebrink). On the wall in front of their bed hung a large framed oleograph. In the centre was the youthful Kaiser Wilhelm II surrounded by ancestors, descendants, German oaks, medals, and so on. Slightly higher up, but still in the middle, stood a young grenadier under whose helmet the face of their landlord, Herr Felten, was pasted in. There, in the midst of his superiors, stood the young soldier, erect and proud amid the pomp and splendour of this world. This paradoxical situation aroused Hausmann’s perennial aggressive streak. Of course, this “glueing on” could be used in many other ways; against stupidity and decadence, to lay the world bare in

¹⁹ Giroud, op.cit.; ibidem.

²⁰ Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold, *Foto-Auge* (Verlag Ernst Wasmuth: Tübingen, 1973); p. 29.

²¹ Letter from Hausmann to Tschichold dated 9th April 1930, in the Bolliger Collection, Zurich.

²² Raoul Hausmann, “Fotomontage” in Michael Erlhoff (ed.) *Texte bis 1933*, volume 2 (Text Kritik: Munich, 1982); pp 130-132.

²³ See Höch’s corroboration of Hausmann’s story in Richter, *Dada Art and Anti-Art*; p.117. See also Heinz Ohff, *Hannah Höch* (Mann Verlag: Berlin, 1968); p.15.

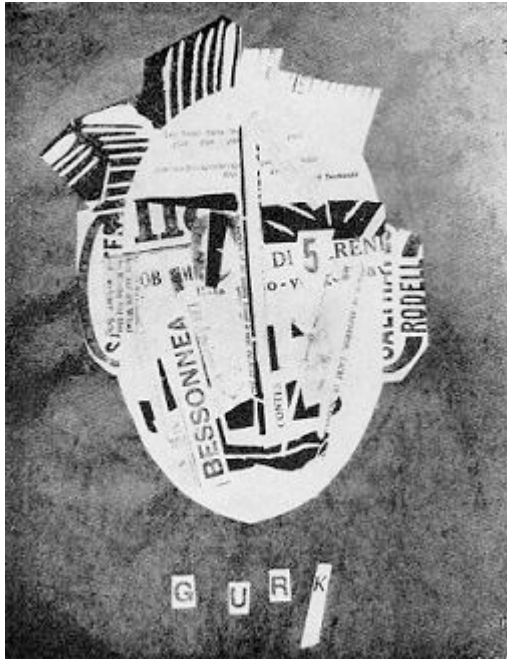


Fig. 5 *Gürk*, Raoul Hausmann, 1919



Fig. 7 *Synthetisches Cino der Malerei*, Raoul Hausmann, 1919



Fig. 6 *Preisauusschreiben! Wer ist der Schönste?*, John Heartfield and George Grosz, 1919

all its abstruse inanity. On his return to Berlin, he began to juxtapose photographic banalities in order to produce abstrusenesses of his own.²⁴

Such artefacts as the ones described in the above passage were common for several decades prior to Dada and must be considered among the sources of photomontage. Indeed, the first photographs incorporated in photomontages by Hausmann were photographs of faces – see, for example, *The Art Critic* (Fig. 1) – and Heartfield and Grosz also began their photomontage in early 1919 with an emphasis on faces and figures – as with, *Preisausschreiben! Wer ist der Schönste??* (Fig. 6), reproduced on the cover of *Jedermann sein eigener Fussbal*.

Although the quote which follows has already been mentioned in the introduction, it is worth noting that Michel Giroud quotes this excerpt from one of Hausmann's letters published in 1958²⁵ which offers a slightly different version of the facts. While remembering his holidays on the Baltic, Hausmann recalled souvenir images of the military service comprising of a lithography evoking the life of a soldier with the man's photographic effigy and let forth his joy:

It was as if I had been struck down by lightning: I intensively foresaw that we could make "paintings" entirely composed of cut-up photographs. After returning to Berlin in September, I began to realise this new vision, using photos from the cinema and the press. In my innovatory zeal I also required a name for the technique, and in the company of George Grosz, John Heartfield, Johannes Baader, and Hannah Höch, we decided to call these works "photomontage". This term translated our aversion towards playing the part of the artist. We regarded ourselves as engineers (whence our preference for work clothes, "overalls"), and our work as construction: we *assembled* [in French: *monter*] our work like a fitter".²⁶

Thus Hausmann claims to have begun photomontage immediately on his return from Heidebrink in September 1918 and he did make at least one small photomontage for Höch at about that time: a Club Dada postcard with the printed text "Ich liebe Dich!" affixed.²⁷ In February 1919, he published his *Synthetisches Cino der Malerei* for which he fashioned a photomontage in October 1919 (Fig. 7). Höch's inventive abstract collage of 1916, *Weisse Wolke*, employs fragments of *Abdeckschablonen* (by-products of the process used in the preparation of woodcuts) fully three years before Hausmann incorporated fragments of

²⁴ Richter, op. cit., ibidem.

²⁵ Raoul Hausmann embarked on writing a French version of "Courier Dada" in 1945. The original German text – *Kurier Dada* – was begun in 1939 and completed in 1956. From the onset it seems that this project was not conceived as an historical survey of Dadaism, but rather as a compilation of letters and comments. Between 1945 and 1947, the French version bore the title "Courier Dada à une jeune femme d'aujourd'hui. Dix et une lettres". Raoul Hausmann had wished for a bilingual publication, but this project never bore fruit. Only the French version was published during the second term of 1958 by Erik Losfeld, (Le Terrain Vague: Paris, 1958).

²⁶ Raoul Hausmann (1958), op. cit.; pp 42-43.

²⁷ Raoul Hausmann, *Am Anfang war Dada* (Anabas-Verlag Günter Kämpf: Steinbach and Giessen, 1970); p.45.

woodcuts in his photomontages.²⁸ Höch encountered these materials during her studies in 1915 with Emil Orlik, and by 1918 she could have been working with photographic material in her position at the Ullstein publishing house.²⁹ Despite their involvement in collage, the first surviving works of photomontages appear to date from the year after the Heidebrink trip.³⁰

Hausmann may have met Kurt Schwitters at the Café des Westens during the autumn of 1918.³¹ Schwitters had been coming to Berlin to visit Herwarth Walden since June, when he took part in a Sturm exhibition.³² According to Hausmann, he was approached by Schwitters at his table and when asked what he did, Schwitters responded, “I am a painter, I nail my pictures”.³³ Schwitters then requested membership of the Club Dada. Hausmann favoured his application but Huelsenbeck opposed it on the grounds that Schwitters was associated with the Expressionist Sturm circle. While there is clearly corroborating evidence for Schwitters’s interest in Dada and for the rejection of his application to the group, it is probable that either his comment about “nailing” his pictures should be associated with a later meeting, possibly in late June or July 1919,³⁴ when Schwitters exhibited his “Merzbilder” (and possibly *Merz* assemblages) at the Sturm galleries, or that the initial meeting between the two artists took place in early 1919.³⁵

In 1918 Schwitters was busy working on a series of increasingly abstract drawings in chalk and also produced his first two collages, *Drawing A2 Hansi* (Fig. 8) and *Drawing A6 Hansi*. *Hansi* is above all a homage to Hans Arp, whom Schwitters is also said to have met at the Café des Westens in 1918.³⁶ Hausmann’s collage for *Material der Malerei Plastik Architektur* (Fig. 9) also owed a debt to Arp, and a mutual interest in Arp and photomontages may well have been intensified in a meeting with Schwitters – especially if *Hansi* can be associated

²⁸ Gotz Adriani. *Collages, Hannah Höch, 1889-1978* (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen: Stuttgart, 1985); p.12.

²⁹ Ellen Maurer, “Symbolische Gemälde von Hannah Höch aus den Jahren 1920-1930” (Ludwig Maximilian Universität: Munich, 1983); p.9; Gotz Adriani. *Collages, Hannah Höch, 1889-1978* (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen: Stuttgart, 1985); p.72.

³⁰ According to Güssefeld, the earliest known photocollages by Höch are dated around 1919 – *Oz der Tragöde* and *Die Mädchen*. Both survive only in photographs in the Höch estate. Delia Güssefeld, “Hannah Höch: Freunde und Briefpartner 1915-1935” (1984); pp 21-23.

³¹ Letter from Schwitters to Hausmann dated 11th November 1946. In Ernst Nündel (ed.), *Wir spielen, Bi uns der Tod abholt: Briefe aus fünf Jahrzehnten* (Ullstein: Frankfurt, 1974); p.247.

³² Schwitters signed the guest book belonging to Nel and Herwarth Walden on 27th June 1918, according to Friedhelm Lach, *Der Merzkünstler Kurt Schwitters* (DuMont Schauberg: Cologne, 1971); p.29. He took part in the 64th Sturm exhibition of June 1918.

³³ “Ich bin Maler, ich nagle meine Bilder”, Schwitters quoted in Raoul Hausmann, op.cit.; p.63.

³⁴ See John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1985); pp 36-41, and Werner Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters* (Harry N. Abrams: New York, 1977); pp 44-47. Adriani claims that Höch, Hausmann and Schwitters met one another in late June 1919; in Gotz Adriani, op. cit.; p.20.

³⁵ Dating suggested by Elderfield who also notes that Schwitters’ first assemblages were made between January and June 1919, in John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1985); p.35.

³⁶ On *Hansi*, see Annegreth Nill, “Rethinking Kurt Schwitters, Part One: An interpretation of “Hansi””, *Arts Magazine* volume 55, number 1 (January 1981); p.112; and John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1985); p.72.

with Schwitters's jubilant reaction to the Revolution of 8th and 9th November.³⁷ Particularly significant is the presence of the commercial component – a chocolate wrapper in *Hansi* – a feature not found in Schwitters's other signed collage of 1918, *Drawing A6*. Arp's use of a commercial wrapper in his *Papierbild* (illustrated in *Cabaret Voltaire*), as well as Hausmann's and possibly Baader's use of newspaper texts and vernacular phrases, might well have come into discussion. Having found a deep kinship with Schwitters,³⁸ Hausmann may well have been interested in the *Merz* works in the Schwitters Sturm exhibition of spring 1919. It is nonetheless clear that their deep friendship did not begin to develop until after December 1920, when they were still sufficiently distant from one another that “without knowing it”, they could publish “almost the same statements” as “defenders of nonsense”.³⁹

If the chronology of the preceding passage is taken into account, it would suggest that the *invention* of photomontage around 1918-1919 seemed of decisive importance only later. Even though early Dada photomontage seems to have little to do with denouncing wartime Europe, it would nonetheless be erroneous to disregard the social and political context in which the artists were living at the time. These artists had suffered from war and witnessed destruction and their art reflected and described this; they were able to transform their art into an ideological weapon. War had invalidated the traditional ideals and humanisms of these artists, who in turn condemned art's traditional criteria of beauty, unity and harmony as hypocritical and irrelevant. Their art was protest and contestation, and as mentioned earlier, a number of them – Hausmann, Höch and Grosz among them – signed an open letter to the Novembergruppe (1921): “... today art is the protest against bourgeois sleepwalking, against the lingering of exploitation and petit bourgeois individualism”.⁴⁰ The medium of the photomontage promised a “contact with matter” (Hausmann) and “the most primitive relation to the reality of the environment” (Huelsenbeck). Like the *bruitism* brought into the movement by Richard Huelsenbeck, the *Plastiken* [sculptures] of Hausmann, Höch, Heartfield and Grosz, and the incorporation of photographs – and eventually actual objects – in photomontages were intended to supplant *Darstellungen* [representations] with what Herzfelde referred to as simply *Sachen* [things].⁴¹ At the same time, by incorporating and altering advertisements and journalistic slogans, and by referring to religious and political

³⁷ This is argued in Annegreth Nill, op. cit.; ibidem.

³⁸ Raoul Hausmann, op. cit., ibidem.

³⁹ “Für die innere Verwandtschaft zwischen Kurt und mir ist es bezeichnend, dass wir zur gleichen Zeit (Dezember 1920), ohne es zu wissen, beinahe die gleichen Sätze veröffentlichen, ich in Berlin, er in Hannover, in denen wir uns als die Verteidiger des Unsinns bekannten”. Raoul Hausmann, op. cit.; p.64.

⁴⁰ Giroud and Wolf, op. cit.; p. 14.

⁴¹ Wieland Herzfelde, “Zur Einführung”, in *Dada-Messe* reported in John Heartfield, *Schnitt entlang der Zeit* (Verlag der Kunst: Dresden, 2002); p.41.



Fig. 8 *Drawing Hansi A2*, Kurt Schwitters, 1918



Fig. 9 *Material der Malerei Plastik Architektur*, Raoul Hausmann, 1918

systems of meaning, photomontage could help draw attention to the conventions which mediate between man and his empirical reality.

Dada artists admired photography because it had an iconic relation to the real, and they hailed the fact that it placed, in Walter Benjamin's words, "the work of art in the age of [its] technical reproduction".⁴² Photography is a mechanical medium which is infinitely reproducible; we could arguably call it a poor man's painting that can, by means of the press and posters, touch the public *en masse*. Through their medium, photomonteurs showed those who refuted photography as art that its mechanical aspect was part and parcel of its artistic quality and that, indeed, it was art. Some of these artists even claimed the primacy of machine over art, or at least claimed the primacy of machine art over traditional art founded on the unique inspiration and the hand of man. This is exemplified by the poster presented by Grosz and Heartfield at the *Erste Dada Messe* of 1920: "Art is dead. Long live Tatlin's machine art!"

The following sections analyse the work of Hausmann himself, as well as that of his fellow Dadaist photomonteurs – Höch, Grosz and Heartfield. The Dadaists established relations with other European artists – in France, Holland, Belgium, Poland, Hungary, Russia, Czechoslovakia, Italy to name but a few – and discussed and influenced each other's work extensively.

Raoul Hausmann – Strategies of Subversion

Raoul Hausmann was born in Vienna in 1886. His father, a classical painter, was his first teacher. His early paintings could be said to have been created in a traditional style. Then around 1915, in keeping with the times, his work began to show the influence of the Expressionists. Progressively, his output of paintings became more irregular. During the period of Berlin Dada (1918-1920), he had more pressing concerns – photomontage, phonetic poetry, publications and countless other acts of agitation and provocation in the service of the Dadaist cause. In the midst of all this activity, however, he still found time for painting, in a style that was abstract, Cubist and Constructivist all at once.

Dada attacked what it perceived as the failure of Expressionism – its non-objectivity (its choice of the non-figural), its lack of engagement and its conceptual vacuum – and set out to convey the noise and speed of modern life, the simultaneity and telescoping of sensations. While painting was not the most effective means of doing this, the Berlin Dada manifesto of 1918 still talked about using the "new material in painting". From 1923, however, Hausmann seems to have become disillusioned with this nostalgic position, for he abandoned painting in favour of optics, photography and esoteric investigations into psychology and ethnography.

⁴² Walter Benjamin, op.cit.; p. 211.

Yet, he continued to draw, for his own purposes at least. His style, judging from what survives, was fairly classical.

In truth, it is hard to follow Hausmann's activities in detail, not only because of the versatility of his personality and work, but because of historical events. Hausmann was a traveller, a tireless agitator and, like many artists of his generation, a victim of the rise of Nazism. As an active (to say the least) member of the avant-garde, consequently deemed a "degenerate artist", he was forced to leave Germany in 1933. When he emigrated he lost most of his work, just like Kurt Schwitters.

Hausmann's initial desire was to see reality as it is, to have a sharpened sense of perception. He wanted to uncover "the spirit of our time" – to take up the subtitle of his best-known work dated 1919, a smooth wooden mannequin's head with technical and numerical prostheses. In his *PREsentist* manifesto of 1921, Hausmann declared that it was necessary to explore everything that was new, and he subsequently became absorbed with experiments in photography.

The tension of the Dada movement as a whole was doubled by the seriousness and radical politics of Berlin Dada. We should bear this in mind when we consider Hausmann's personality and activities. Hausmann was a radical anarchist and political militant. He was also an artist who wanted to create an ironic and original expression of the relations that were constantly forming between the most incongruous and banal things – concepts that later fascinated the Surrealists, and reminiscent of their *Cadavres exquis*, for example. Hausmann's work as photomonteur went hand in hand with his writing of polemical texts. Dada was boundlessly creative, and, with its irony and black humour, offered no form of consensus – even less a token of reconciliation. Dada's mockery led not only to creation but to destruction. Understanding this ambivalence allows us to comprehend some of the contradictions found in Hausmann's works.

As Hans Richter pointed out, Hausmann had "gallows humour" which was borne out of hatred: he turned despair into violence, mockery into destruction. Hausmann's thoughts on art were quintessentially Dadaist, with a hard edge of Berlin realism regarding art's role within the new world. This formidable lucidity about the nature of art was the anchor for Hausmann's dark, raging creativity.

Hausmann and Photography

Art was for Hausmann "the way man teaches himself to recognise the world in himself and himself in the world".⁴³ He also felt this way of teaching varied according to the culture. Thus in the range of its styles and forms, art is always the product of its time and culture. Dada

⁴³ "Die Kunst und die Zeit", in Eje Höggestätt and Paul-Armand Gette, *Raoul Hausmann* (Malmö Konsthall: Malmö, 1980); p.27.



Fig. 10 *Dada Cino*, Raoul Hausmann, 1920



Fig. 11 *Elasticum*, Raoul Hausmann, 1920

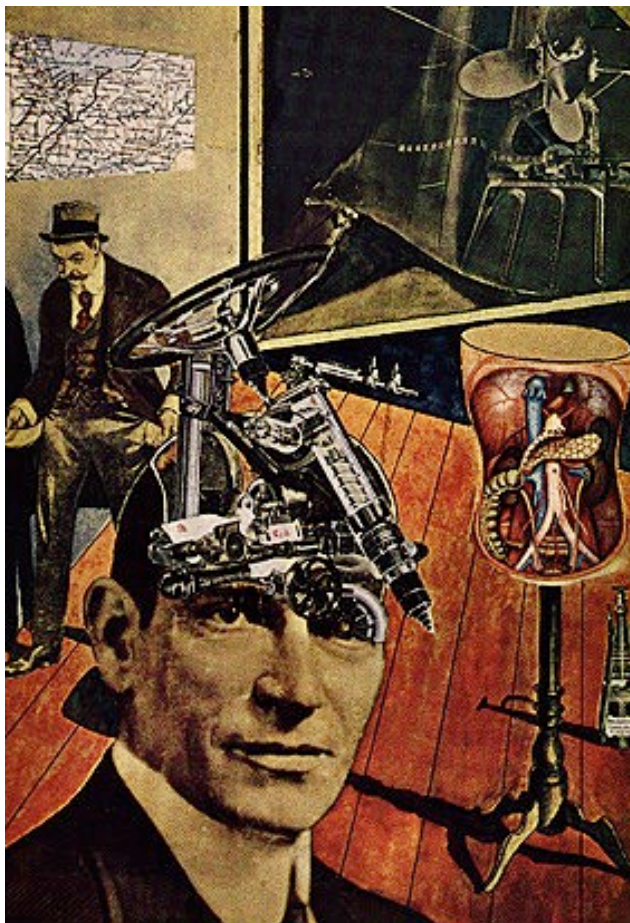


Fig. 12 *Tatlin at Home*, Hausmann, 1920

condemned the enduring fascination with perspective, with bourgeois art and with Expressionism because it believed that the first task of the modern artist was to discover the art form capable of expressing the new man. A world transformed by technology, economic upheaval, war and revolution called for a transformed vision, “a new attitude in the optical domain”.⁴⁴ Hence the imperative to create “in the present”, with the technical means “of the present”.

Photography was thus a material which naturally appealed to the Dada artists. For many of Hausmann’s contemporaries, the exercise of photography was essentially located in the tradition of the nature study inherited from the fine arts, coupled with the tradition of positivist scientific observation. This use of photography is what Hausmann energetically refuted in the 1922 manifesto, “We Are Not Photographers”.⁴⁵

At this time, Hausmann had not yet used photography simply to record or duplicate reality, rather he used photographs and photographic reproductions as raw material for his art – and he used typography in the same way too. He was particularly interested in photographs as reproduced in newspapers and magazines, wherein the medium of ink on paper had transformed them not only visually but also in terms of their social and historical function; they served as convenient references to the realities which the artist ridiculed, satirised, and ultimately, tried to transform. Each photographic reproduction Hausmann incorporated into his photomontages supplied a whole set of references to the print and communication media as well. More than mere cultural or historical artefacts, such images were further modified in their meanings by new juxtapositions, rearrangements and contexts. With photographs, the Dadaists were able to question the traditional academic view of visual art through this machine imagery (camera imagery altered by the printing press). The notions of construction and montage came from this more recent source, associating the industrial technique of printing (developed by engineers) with the procedures of cinema, as witnessed by the collages *Synthetisches Cino der Malerei* (Fig. 7) and *Dada Cino* (Fig. 10), and the numerous mechanical elements combined in *Elasticum* (Fig. 11) and *Tatlin at Home* (Fig. 12), as well as various declarations in Dadaist manifestoes and later historical accounts. Among these, the story of the invention of photomontage – this story, mentioned in the previous section, was drafted in 1946 and included in *Courier Dada* in 1958 – is particularly eloquent. The circumstances of the invention recall the taste for naïve art, widespread in the literary and artistic avant-gardes before Constructivism: Hausmann initially evokes the nineteenth-century model of photomontage applied to the popular rite of commemorative photography, which, as mentioned earlier, he discovered in 1918 during his stay on the Baltic coast with Hannah Höch.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ This text was first published in French in *Courier Dada*.

In the lecture given at the opening of the first anthological exhibition of photomontage presented at the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin in 1931 by César Domela, Hausmann defined, for the first time, his position in the history of the avant-gardes since Dada: he adopted the distanced and lucid attitude of a man able to observe and objectively analyse a cultural evolution which he had helped initiate. Briefly, but with great precision, he recalled the context and limits of the usage that the photomonteurs of the Berlin Dada Club had made of photographic material. He observed that they had been unable to transform a tool of subversion, employed in a framework of “cultural criticism”, into a propaganda method – even if the possibility had been glimpsed. But propaganda photomontage was now well established and widely used. Hausmann groups the political activism of the Soviet artists and the advertising applications of photomontage under the single term “propaganda”, stressing that both led to the same constructive simplification of the procedure. From the explosive complexity of Dadaist photomontage, founded on the heterogeneous material of words and images – which incidentally explains the frequent confusion between early photomontage and collage mentioned in the introduction – a syntax of the “optical element” with its “opposing structures and dimensions” had emerged, permitting “the clearest working out of the dialectical problems of form”. In 1931, two years after the major exhibition *Film und Foto* in Stuttgart (organised by Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold) and six years after Moholy-Nagy’s book *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, it was clearly time to acknowledge that photomontage was no longer the alternative to Futurist and Expressionist painting that it had been for the Dadaists, who were still bound to the solutions of “individualistic playfulness”: its possibilities had developed in a vast movement of collective creation – and “propaganda” – which associated photography to silent film.⁴⁶

Published in the May 1931 issue of the Cologne-based journal *A bis Z*, Hausmann’s important text entitled “Photomontage” was completed by an essay entitled “The Dialectic of Form in Photography”. Thus Hausmann demonstrated by example the possibilities of “a new optical standpoint on photography”, founded on a decomposition of vision into “changing

⁴⁶ The Dadaists “knew that great propagandistic power inhered in their method and that contemporary life was not courageous enough to develop and absorb it. Things have changed a great deal since then. The current exhibition at the Art Library shows the importance of photomontage as a means of propaganda in Russia. And every movie program – be it *The Melody of the World*, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, *Mother Krausen’s Journey to Happiness*, or *Africa Speaks* – proves that the business world has largely recognized the value of this propagandistic effect. The advertisements for these films are unimaginable without photomontage, as though it were an unwritten law [...] The realm of photography, silent film, and photomontage lends itself to so many possibilities as there are changes in the environment, its social structure, and kinds of psychological superstructures; and the environment is changing everyday. Photomontage has not reached the end of its development any more than silent film has. The formal means of both media need to be disciplined, and their respective realms of expression need sifting and reviewing.” Raoul Hausmann, “Photomontage”, in Christopher Phillips (ed.) *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writing, 1913-1940* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989); p.179.

points of view". He indicated that montage can establish dynamic relations between images, insofar as they have broken away from naturalist representation and never constitute a complete, unified vision. Rather than simply fixing a piece of visual information, images define "Relationen" [relations] – one of Hausmann's key words – because in themselves they already result from a play of relations, or more particularly, of oppositions, which are situated both in the internal organisation of figures – the construction of a face, for instance – and in the framing of the shot, with its various possibilities of focus and directional thrust – low-angle, high-angle, oblique, etc. Whence the renewed affirmation of the cinematographic model, or rather, of film revisited by plastic art: "Today our art is already film! Event, plasticity, and picture all at once!"⁴⁷ For film is the movement of images imprinted by light – itself in movement – whose "tangible energy" is "compressed" by photomontage into the static frame of the picture.

By alternating close-ups and more distant views, canted or receding, but also by combining – within the same image or from one image to the next – zones of fullness and emptiness, modelled reliefs and curving lines, all distributed within a broad register of values, the regular and didactic montage of *A bis Z* very precisely translates the observations made in the Berlin lecture: "If photomontage in its primitive form was an explosion of viewpoints and a whirling confusion of picture planes more radical in its complexity than Futurist painting, it has since then undergone an evolution that could be called constructive. There has been a general recognition of the great versatility of the optical element in pictorial expression. Photomontage, in particular, with its opposing structures and dimensions (such as rough versus smooth, aerial view versus close-up, perspective versus flat plane), allows the greatest technical diversity and the clearest working out of the dialectical problems of form".⁴⁸ Hausmann accorded an evident privilege to three parameters of the photographic composition that were experimented with, and systematised, during the twenties: an analytic and intensive fragmentation of the human body – set apart from the psychological peculiarities expressed by physiognomy; a geometric construction dictated by new optical laws; and a definition by light of structural oppositions inscribed in the contrasts of forms or materials.

Hausmann, Schwitters, De Stijl, Rodchenko and Moholy-Nagy

In 1921, Hausmann was closer to Schwitters and his intuitive *Merz* plasticity than to the anti-art ideology whose orthodoxy Huelsenbeck had sought to ensure – for instance, by turning down Schwitters's request to join the Dada Club. Hausmann's contribution to *De Stijl* and his interest in Constructivism result from this orientation and from his association in 1922 with van Doesburg at the Weimar Bauhaus. One could even maintain that the 1918 definition of

⁴⁷ Michael Erlhoff (ed.), *Texte bis 1933*, volume 2 (Munich: Text Kritik, 1982); p. 26.

⁴⁸ Erlhoff, op. cit.; p.179-180.

Dada as “the most primitive relation to the surrounding reality” lead him almost logically to sign the “Call for an Elementary Art” in October 1921 with Hans Arp, Jean Pougny, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and thus to declare: “We stand for elementary art. Art is elementary when it does not philosophise, when it is built up solely from its own elements. To be an artist is to give way to the elements of formation [*Gestaltung*]”.⁴⁹ From this idea of elementary art, Theo Van Doesburg would later draw the famous notion of “elementarism” which, in association with “counter-composition”, constitutes the overcoming of the neo-plasticist dogma of orthogonal composition, judged too static.⁵⁰ Although very different, both Dada and *De Stijl* were movements in which the boundaries between fine art and graphic design were distinctively blurred. Investigation of photomontage demonstrates this positive interpenetration and cross-pollinisation on sustaining innovation in art and graphic design.

In this European context of post-Dadaism, marked by the expansion of *De Stijl* and by the first developments of Constructivism on its way from Russia, photography still appeared too imbued with the naturalism and positivism of the nineteenth century as mentioned at the beginning of the previous section. Considered essentially as a technique of mechanical reproduction, it served as a foil for avant-gardes which were concerned with breaking all forms of verism and the illusionist imitation of nature. Having distanced themselves from the pictorial subjectivism celebrated by Expressionism, the Dadaists had opened the path to a new appreciation of the photographic technique; but they were more interested in cinema and in the combination of pre-existing images permitted by photomontage. It may also be noted that important contributions to *De Stijl*, after its rapprochement with Dada through the urging of Van Doesburg, came from three film artists: Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling, and Werner Gräff (who would later publish the famous *Es kommt der neue Fotograf* in 1929). Hausmann, who had been close to Richter and Eggeling since the early twenties, had perfectly understood all that linked photomontage to the dynamics of experimental film. He knew that the propagandistic power inherent in photomontage had been exploited and developed in silent film and particularly in advertising, thus radically distinguishing it from collage. It was in the technique of film, and not in photography, that one could verify the association of movement and light that had appeared to him as the determining motif of a new creative energy – an idea he transmitted to Moholy-Nagy.⁵¹ Thus it comes as a scant surprise that he took his first

⁴⁹ A French version is published in addendum to Raoul Hausmann, *Courier Dada*; in a note, Marc Dachy rightly points out that this idea of “elementary art” should not be too hastily confused with the “elementarism” advocated by Van Doesburg.

⁵⁰ On elementarism, counter-composition, and the debate with Piet Mondrian, see Hans Jaffé, *De Stijl: 1917-1931* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986); pp 26-27.

⁵¹ On Moholy-Nagy’s adherence to the energetics of light developed by Hausmann on the basis of Ernst Marcus’s theory, see Veit Loers, “‘L’Espace du Présent’ de Moholy-Nagy et l’utopie d’une lumière dynamique constructive”, in Laszlo Moholy-Nagy et al., *Laszlo Moholy-Nagy* (Marseille: Musée Cantini, 1991); p.75. Andreas Haus had already indicated these relations between Hausmann and Moholy-Nagy in *Moholy-Nagy: Fotos und Fotogramme* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1978); pp 66,

straight photographs late, beginning in 1927, when artists such as Moholy-Nagy and, more importantly, Alexander Rodchenko, already had considerable experience in this area.

Hausmann's lack of experience in manipulating the photographic medium must have obviously influenced his approach to the photographic medium, and a comparison with Rodchenko is illuminating. It is evident that a technical working knowledge of the photographic apparatus would indeed shape the artist's approach to the medium. Montage and photomontage have an inherently mechanical nature which influences artistic production and permeates the creative process. Rodchenko had begun to practise photomontage late in 1922, three years after Hausmann; but only three months later, in 1923, he used it to illustrate Mayakovsky's book *Pro Eto*, combining vast stocks of found images with photographic portraits commissioned for the occasion, in an approach which already springs from an attitude other than simple appropriation. The following year, Rodchenko began to make his own photographs. And if in 1925, he was still, by his own admission, "a bad photographer", it is clear that he was greatly interested in the technique. Two years later, he made his photographic research official in *Novy LEF*, having carried it out alone or within the framework of his teaching activities for VKhUTEMAS; it bore as much on the material realisation of the image (the single print) as on the procedures of the filmic shot. In 1928, the partisans of Productivist orthodoxy were already reproaching him an overly "aesthetic" use of the medium. He answered by defending the legitimacy of an experimental approach that could allow the production of a "perfect "easel" photograph".⁵² In a short time, Rodchenko's path of experimentation with photomontage led him to consider photography as a means of producing autonomous visual compositions, and therefore as a perfectly viable alternative to painting. This position had already become possible for him, in the evolution of his revolutionary involvement, for two essential reasons: firstly, because he had broken with both easel and abstract (non-objective) painting as early as 1921, bringing the logic of reductionism to its limit with the three monochromes of the exhibition $5 \times 5 = 25$; and secondly, because he had collaborated with Dziga Vertov since 1922, designing titles for

78-79; and in *Raoul Hausmann: Kamerafotografien 1927-1957* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1979); p.13. It must be stressed that Hausmann co-signed the *Second PREsentist Manifesto* with Eggeling; the text was published in the Hungarian Constructivist journal *MA* in 1922. Here he declares: "Let us push our research in optics all the way to the principles of light!" In the same vein he had written in the first *PREsentist* manifesto one year earlier: "We have already taken up all the historic optical possibilities into our way of seeing and now we pursue optics to the basic phenomena of light. We love light and its movement!" in Erlhoff, op. cit.; p.27.

⁵² Rodchenko maintained that photography should not seek to imitate painting (an anti-pictorialist position characteristic of the Constructivist avant-garde) and that "fetishism of the "fact" " must also be avoided. Whence the conclusion: "A LEFtist is not someone who photographs fact but someone who, through photography, can struggle against the "imitations of art" with high-quality images; but to do so one must experiment, until one can obtain a perfect "easel" photograph". In Selim Khan Magomedov, *Alexandre Rodtchenko* (Paris: Philippe Sers, 1986); p.228.

Vertov's newsreels and using typography and graphic art in poster designs for *Kino-Eye* in 1924.

As interested as he was in the communist idea, Hausmann did not have the same revolutionary involvement as Rodchenko. He had renounced easel painting, but without producing the systematic reduction which, in Rodchenko's work, culminated in the isolation of a model that could be used again afterwards (with other means than those of painting); furthermore, he had never explicitly broken with abstraction; and finally, his interest in film had borne on the research carried out by Eggeling and Richter, more "experimental" and abstract than the Soviet films. Indeed, it is precisely during his first major period of photographic activity, from 1927 to 1933, that Hausmann looked closely at the films of Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and Alexander Dovzhenko.⁵³ In comparison with Rodchenko's photomontage practice, which had evolved from an intense research in straight photography, Hausman's approach to photomontage was undeniably instinctive and investigational.

A comparison with Moholy-Nagy is equally interesting. As indicated in the title of his 1925 volume, *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, photography was a middle path for Moholy-Nagy, a form of junction between painting and cinema. The Bauhaus teacher was a man of communication: he loved to establish relations, form ensembles, constitute networks, gather energies. This could explain his fascination for the figure of the modern metropolis, which in 1921-22 inspired one of his finest projects, *Dynamic of the Big City*. Later established in *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, this piece was defined as the "sketch of a script" and an exercise in "typophoto", or in other words, as a script treated in photomontage. Since the twenties, Hausmann too had manifested a concern for didacticism, if not for pedagogy. But he never taught. He was also a man of multiple relations, attributing great importance to exchange and collaboration with other artists; but his partnerships were more of the order of encounters than of sustained relations. He was always in the company of one or more women, and he also preferred to stay clear of cities, far from Berlin – his long and numerous stays on the coast or in the countryside testify of this. He was, moreover, the archetype of the non-professional, if not anti-professional, artist – a trait which became even more pronounced in the twenties, when the majority of the avant-garde artists he was close to, men such as Schwitters, Domela, or Moholy-Nagy, had conversely become more and more professional, devoting themselves to utilitarian activities – industrial typography, advertising, teaching. This is obviously reflected in their photomontage practice which became increasingly "professional" in appearance because they benefited from the latest technological advances in graphic design. Hausmann's works, on the other hand, kept an artisan quality and displayed a rugged finish. The Dada years, and even those before Dada, had been marked by the idea of the *bohème*

⁵³ Hausmann published a text on Dovzhenko's *Earth* in *A bis Z* in January 1931; this text can be found in Michael Erlhoff, op. cit.; pp122-126.

inherited from the nineteenth century. Like Wols – Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze, the exemplary figure of the anti-professional artist – Hausmann remained faithful to this life model, even if unlike Wols he cultivated traits of dandyism; which is not necessarily opposed to the bohemian spirit, nor to the fact that Hausmann enjoyed occasional retreats to the country. Finally, it must be added that from 1922 to the end of the decade, the personal wealth of Hausmann's second wife, Hedewig Nanckiewicz, allowed him financial independence. He was therefore in many respects the opposite of Moholy-Nagy, who cut the characteristic figure of the artist-engineer, the ideologue of modern art.

Indeed Hausmann had a wide-ranging historical view, but the 1931 lecture on photomontage should not give the impression that he was a generous partisan of ecumenical Constructivism, in the mould of Moholy-Nagy. This historical view reappears with a more militant and more interested intent in a 1949 text where, in opposition to an art of (communist) propaganda, he identifies the defence of modern art with a Dadaist timeliness. "The more we contemplate", he wrote, "the more evident it becomes that the creative principle developed in Dadaism is identical with the principle of modern art. Dadaism and modern art are one in their essential presuppositions; consequently the misunderstandings that arise in connection with modern art are identical with the misunderstandings that have pursued Dada since its founding in 1916".⁵⁴ In 1931 Hausmann, like Domela, could accept a proximity of communist propaganda and advertising; but to defend his title as the inventor of photomontage he already took heed not to mention Heartfield, nor of course Rodchenko or Gustav Klucis (all claiming the same title); whereas he did cite Albert Renger-Patzsch and Helmar Lerski alongside August Sander, in a list of the contemporary photographers who, in his view, should be counted within the same modern movement.

Hausmann's dearth of the main protagonists of photomontage was manifestly quite calculated. In Lerski and Renger-Patzsch, he defended two photographers over whom Sander had systematically been favoured in the circles of the Constructivist avant-garde and the Marxist intelligentsia. Two years earlier, in the name of descriptive realism, Renger-Patzsch had come out violently against the experimental photography supported by Moholy-Nagy and broadly represented in *Film und Foto*.⁵⁵ What is more, the works of Renger-Patzsch and Lerski, like those of Sander, did not involve photomontage, even if the cover of *Die Welt ist schön* by Renger-Patzsch had been laid out by Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart. Lerski's dramatised, close-up portraits were far from the Constructivist aesthetic. In reality, Hausmann mentioned the tendencies which corresponded to his own images, since the time he had

⁵⁴ Robert Motherwell (ed.), *The Dada Painters and Poets* (London: Belknap Press, 1979); p.398.

⁵⁵ Renger-Patzsch and Ernő Kallaï drafted a violent diatribe against the Stuttgart exhibition, published in Christopher Phillips (ed.) *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 1989); pp 140-141.

started to practise photography in 1927. He was quite familiar with Sander, as the latter had twice taken his portrait in 1928. The portraits he did himself were closer to Lerski's, and his many landscapes were not without relation to Renger-Patzsch's studies of natural structures. Although he did not mix Constructivist experimentation with a pictorialist attitude, in the style of Renger-Patzsch and the other partisans of a specificity of photography irreducible to the fine arts, Hausmann finally did take on, rather late, a clear identity as a photographer. He had not entered in a professional activity, but he had in fact taken on a new artistic identity, ten years after Dada. One might perceive this as a surprising reversal of opinion for the man who, in 1921, had drafted the manifesto "We Are Not Photographers" mentioned earlier. Indeed prior to 1927, Hausmann had only ever used photographs as the raw material for his art and had not yet himself experimented with making his own photographs.

Gaze and Sound: Optophonetics

In reality, the photography that Hausmann began to practise in 1927 is not what he had denounced six years earlier. The optical studies he had undertaken in 1927 – as an autodidact, but with the help of Daniel Broïdo, an engineer – had convinced him that a new definition of the image in conformity with the actual workings of sight ought to permit a reversal of the conventions and constraints of illusionistic verisimilitude, founded on a mechanistic and anthropocentric reduction of the living world. Hausmann belonged to a post-Expressionist generation for whom the development of technical and industrialist culture was not just a cause for fear: despite the horrors of mechanised war, this development still seemed to call for a new integration of man into nature and the cosmos, as suggested by non-Euclidean geometry, and a conception of matter that had broken with classical mechanics. In his opposition to the naturalist conventions of the nineteenth century, he refused a static, authoritarian, "egocentric" interpretation of the relations of the living world; but the anti-naturalism of the first avant-garde movements and their claim to discover a more dynamic vision was reducible, for Hausmann, to the "arbitrary formulae of Expressionism and Futurism".⁵⁶ He believed that the decentring of naturalist identity – the identity of the observer who masters the organisation of appearances - should be rethought in rigorously optical and phenomenological terms, since this identity had in fact been artificially constructed to compensate for a physiological deficiency. "These are problems for photography, more exact and appropriate than our eyes, which should be living and dynamic".⁵⁷

⁵⁶ From the French translation of Hausmann's "Wir sind nicht die Fotografen", in *Courier Dada* (Éditions le Terrain Vague: Paris, 1958); p.92.

⁵⁷ Ibidem.

The Dadaist appeal to “the most primitive relation to the surrounding reality” had constituted a necessary first stage. In 1918, Hausmann wrote *Das neue Material in der Malerei* [The New Material in Painting], where he maintained: “A child’s cast-off doll or a scrap of coloured cloth are more necessary expressions than those of the average ass who bids in oils for the immortality of fine salons”.⁵⁸ The Dadasoph could not remain content with the primitivist aesthetic that was already firmly established among the avant-gardes. What had to be defined was an experimental freedom founded on specific delimitations. In the space of the *Klebebild* [glued picture], photomontage accentuated the new relation between photographic image and visualised language. A parallel can be found in abstract poems, where the word-images dissolve and multiply into a configuration of phonetic indications. Indeed, Hausmann remarked: “The Dadaists, who had “invented” static, simultaneous and phonetic poetry, applied the same principles to visual representation”.⁵⁹ Here, typography and typophotography – which also constituted one of Constructivism’s specialised areas of research – are the fruits of an experience that is physiological or “optophonetic”, meaning visual, acoustic, and rhythmic all at once.⁶⁰ Thus Hausmann attached the image – even the mechanical image – to the physical formation of verbal expression. Interested in psychoanalysis and psychiatry under the influence of Otto Gross, he was highly sensitive to the pathological deformations of linguistic structures, at the level of morphology, syntax, and rhythm.⁶¹ Optophonetics was developed less as an exploration of synaesthetic relations in the perspective of a synthesis of the arts or of a total artwork, and more as a hypothesis of self-

⁵⁸ *Das neue Material in der Malerei* is the title of the manifesto illustrated by the photomontage *Synthetisches Cino der Malerei*; it was read by Hausmann for the first Dada gathering in Berlin in April 1918. The text is reprinted in Michael Erlhoff, op. cit.

⁵⁹ Richter, op. cit.; p. 116.

⁶⁰ Hausmann wrote: “I thought the poem was the rhythm of sounds. Why words? From the rhythmic sequence of the consonants and diphthongs, and as a counter-movement to their complement of vowels, results the poem, which must be simultaneously oriented, optically and phonetically. The poem is the fusion of dissonance and onomatopoeia. The poem springs from the inner gaze and hearing of the poet, by the material power of the sounds, the noises, and the tonal form, anchored in the very gesture of language”. This text can be found in Raoul Hausmann, *Courier Dada* (Éditions le Terrain Vague: Paris, 1958); p.59. Hausmann never ceased to insist on the physiological dimension that optophonetics impresses on typography, just as he stressed the visual and plastic dimension that the letter gives to sound – indeed, this focus on the letter sets his research apart from that of Hugo Ball. Typography was to effect the formation (*Gestaltung*) of phonetic energy. Like photomontage, it could then visualise a “dynamic stasis” of natural sounds and movements on the page. See the commentary on the poem *grün* in Timothy Benson, *Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1987); pp 93-94.

⁶¹ Recalling the origins of the phonetic poem, Hausmann successively mentions German Romantic literature and the interest in psychoanalysis among the circle that formed around Franz Jung in Berlin, from 1916 to 1918. He adds: “The writer Carl Einstein, as well as Franz Jung, attempted to find the means for a new language for the expression of contemporary psychological knowledge. In Einstein’s work and particularly his book *Bebuquin*, this tendency toward a linguistic renewal involved a kind of neurotic semantics above all. It is undeniable that he exercised a great influence on all of us”. In Raoul Hausmann, *Courier Dada* (Éditions le Terrain Vague: Paris, 1958); p.58.

formation, in the best tradition of *Bildung*.⁶² For Hausmann, Dadaism's share in the "new man" was essentially an individual effort towards psychic transformation – an expansion of consciousness on the basis of a "practical self-detoxication". The photographic activity that he undertook in 1927 evidently transpired in his subsequent photomontage practice. To the extent that it gave him a new artistic identity and confirmed the hypothesis of self-transformation set forth in the optophonetic research.

In addition to the four previously mentioned images illustrating the essay on "The Dialectic of Form in Photography", the 1931 publication in *A bis Z* contained another montage, directly accompanying the text of the lecture given at the opening of Domela's exhibition. Composed of irregular close-up views of faces in a vertical alignment, it falls down the page with an oblique movement, like a cascade of images. The first, in the upper left-hand corner, shows the fixed perhaps astonished gaze of a man whose half-open mouth appears on the lower right-hand side. In the interval, three variants of the first image are distributed and the profile of a woman whose right eye is isolated, as though torn from its socket, is placed within the circular frame of a magnifying mirror. The fragments were drawn from recent portraits, but Hausmann also recalled in his images the optophonetic relation between the eye (optics) and the mouth (phonetics) that had appeared in many photomontages of the Dada period, and particularly in the first among them, *Synthetische Cino der Malerei* (Fig. 7), which already played on the decomposition of a portrait, creating a visual rhyme between a screaming mouth encircled by an O and an eye encircled by a monocle. The same Hausmann portrait, used in 1918 for *Synthetische Cino der Malerei*, reappears in its entirety in the photomontage produced by Heartfield in 1920 for the third issue of *Der Dada* (Fig. 13), and then again, still later, in Hausmann's last Dada photomontage *ABCD* (Fig. 4), where the optophonetic scheme is presented as the fundament of a cosmic and planetary poetry integrating the *Merz* art of Schwitters.

By combining fragments, montage had established a genuinely expressive – and highly comprehensive – relation between the eye and the mouth, between the organ that captures and the one that emits, between reflection and utterance. Founded on a metonymic proximity, this relation also played on the metaphor of the devouring gaze. Finally, in its dissociation from the vertical axis of the body, this relation was literally oblique: it broke the conventional

⁶² *Gestaltung* (shaping, formation) shares in the process of the subject's *Bildung* (education, in the sense of *Bildungsroman*). Even if he thrusts aside the authority over the development of German literature traditionally accorded to the great classical authors (Goethe, Schiller), Hausmann always shows himself to be an educated man, who believes in the education of the self (*Selbstbildung*), above all if it is a matter of enlarging the sphere of the individual consciousness beyond the limits artificially assigned to it. To do so, the process of formation/education must be broached before the conscious level. For an interpretation of *Bildung* in the tradition of the "great humanists", see Louis Dumont, *L'Idéologie allemande* (Gallimard: Paris, 1991).



Fig. 13 Photomontage for the cover of *Der Dada*, issue n° 3, John Heartfield, 1920

alignment of the phonetic on binocular symmetry.⁶³ Thus it proposed a genuine articulation in the vocal and anatomic sense: it could multiply into the ensemble of the living world, as speech diffuses into sound waves moving through space, or diffracts into phonetic indications on the page. In “We Are Not Photographers”, Hausmann clearly indicated this process of multiplying the initial asymmetry of an eye-mouth relation: “Sight, when it is creative, is the configuration [*Gestaltung*] of the tensions and distensions in the essential relations of a body, whether a man, an animal, a plant, a stone, a machine, a part, or a whole; it is not the centre, coldly and mechanically observed...”⁶⁴

It would seem that Hausmann’s art preferred tension to division, favouring binary oppositions in order to resolve duality, and reviving an aesthetic – pre-classical and pre-mechanistic – in which the world is a macrocosm, an organic and dynamic system analogous to the microcosm of the human body. To launch such a process of formation, at once plastic and psychic, it is necessary to accept dissociation or fragmentation, seeking resolution in extremes. The single non-manipulated photographic take is a sober, measured, laconic form, and thus lends itself poorly to an experience of excess. Nonetheless, photography finally matched Hausmann’s needs: it offered the best access to the fragmentary condition of modern man, further accentuated by the refusal of ideological systems. Photography allowed Hausmann to situate this condition on the strictly perceptual level, and therefore in “the most primitive relation to the surrounding reality”. The photographic image was, one might say, an exemplary fragment. The photograph is both a piece of the visual world or the natural order – a small image without any pretention to the completeness of the pictorial composition – and the expression of a discontinuity in perception. The practice of photography, could thus become a way of spelling out the world and of transforming it in the process, translating its fragments into *elements* for the integration of a new identity.

The Total Woman: Hannah Höch on Art, Individuality and Gender Issues

As the Dada male artists defied the conventional boundaries of art, they also challenged patriarchal authority and promoted the ideal of the modern man. Their female counterparts also reflected on the condition of modern woman. The rise of feminism in late nineteenth- and

⁶³ Binocular symmetry is a phenomenon of visual perception in which perception alternates between different images presented to each eye. When one image is presented to one eye and a very different image is presented to the other, instead of the two images being seen superimposed, one image is seen for a few moments, then the other, then the first, and so on, randomly for as long as one cares to look. For example, if a set of vertical lines is presented to one eye, and a set of horizontal lines to the same region of the retina of the other, sometimes the vertical lines are seen with no trace of the horizontal lines, and sometimes the horizontal lines are seen with no trace of the vertical lines. At transitions, brief, unstable composites of the two images may be seen; these are often organized. For example, the vertical lines may appear one at a time to obscure the horizontal lines from the left or from the right, or the horizontal lines may appear one at a time to obscure the vertical lines from the top or from the bottom.

⁶⁴ Michael Erlhoff, op. cit.; p.58.

early twentieth-century Europe provoked a variety of responses among European men and prompted what might be called a crisis of masculinity, because the meanings that had constituted traditional gender definitions were challenged. The experience of modernity in Weimar Germany was projected onto the representation of woman that the image of the New Woman – with bobbed hair, masculinised but made-up face, wage work and a new sense of physical and sexual freedom – saturated the mass media; that it was an image of both hope and anxiety to Weimar women in general and to Hannah Höch in particular.⁶⁵

With distance and the knowledge gained from the various exhibitions of work by Hannah Höch, it is possible to draw one conclusion: that here is an artist of multiple and varied registers, an artist who experimented with different disciplines, a complete artist. This completeness, however, has been ignored in artistic fields, which have tended to recognise only her participation in the Dada movement.⁶⁶ And yet, in the 1920s, when Höch was producing not only photomontages but also drawings and paintings, this disciplinary heterogeneity was frowned on by those contemporaries who were suspicious of her adherence to the groundbreaking anti-style of Dadaism. There were, of course, other reasons, not least the genuine misogyny of these artists, regarded in the history of art as radical and subversive.

Nonetheless, Höch's latter years were accompanied by recognition for her work, initially in collective shows that focussed mainly on her contribution to Dada, and then in solo exhibitions, such as those held in Kyoto in 1974 and in Paris and Berlin in 1976. Höch continued full steam with her meticulous work and continued to use smallness, diminutiveness and vulnerability – from the onset of her career she attached great importance to miniatures, as demonstrated by her famous *minis* on paper – to create a wonderful repository of sensations and images, without ever ceasing to transcend the barriers that she herself had always rejected. It is this particular aspect that has made her a complete artist, a “total woman” engaged in total art as mentioned earlier.

Similarly, personal vicissitudes and the social and political context against which she played out her life also help to explain how her highly symbolic body of work came to be eclipsed. At the end of her career, on being asked about the major themes of her work, she

⁶⁵ For a discussion of the New Woman in relation to Höch's work, see Maud Lavin, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife. The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1993).

⁶⁶ The 1960s were marked by a sudden passion for Dadaism: *The Art of Assemblage*, MoMA, New York 1961; *Dada*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm 1966; *Dada, Surrealism and their Heritage*, MoMA, New York 1968; Höch remarked that a large part of her correspondence referred to this matter. See Eberhard Roters, “Bildsymbolik im Werk Hannah Höch” in *Hannah Höch. Collagen*, exhibition catalogue (IFA, Stuttgart: 1984); p.65.

defined these symbols as: “Symbols of growth and extinction, of love and hate, of glorification and rejection, but also of the search for beauty; especially hidden beauty.”⁶⁷

Read from a modern perspective, these words, with their allusion to beauty, could be perceived as an old-fashioned conception of art; a closer reading, however, reveals a vision of the dialectic duality of existence that lends complexity to her work. There is no single reading and no single angle. As Höch herself declared in 1929, her dissenting approach does not fit easily with unilaterality:

I want to erase the fixed boundaries that we humans confidently tend to draw around everything within our reach. I try to convey this, to make it visually perceptible, by painting pictures. I want to show that what is small can also be large, and what is large small; it is only the viewpoint from which we judge it that changes, and all concepts lose their validity, as do all our human laws. I want to continue formulating the warning that, in addition to your conceptions and opinions and my own, there are millions and millions of other legitimate viewpoints. Today I would rather depict the world as it is seen by a bee, tomorrow as it is seen by the moon, and thereafter as it is seen by many other creatures, but I am a human being; I can, however, by virtue of my fantasies, be a bridge. I wish to convey that what seems impossible is possible. I want to help people experience a much richer world, so that we can engage more benevolently with the world we know.⁶⁸

In a time of intense political struggle, with the resulting sectarianism and lively aesthetic confrontations among the partisans of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* [New Objectivity], the champions of Expressionism, the followers of the Constructive experimentation of the Bauhaus, the insurgent Dadaism and other trends, Höch's postulates, even as a latter observation, sound conciliatory and amenable. This translated into the aesthetic and conceptual hybridisation that subsequently characterised the majority of her art and became her trademark.

Hybridisation and cross-breeding were ways of bringing to the surface the hidden beauty referred to above. Moreover, despite having embodied the exultant language of Dadaism, hers is not a belligerent approach in the face of the varied and contradictory realities of life and art. This is evident from the fact that she participated on several occasions in shows by the Novembergruppe. Having emerged in 1920, this group embraced, through didactic and educational activities, a wide range of artistic trends and was regarded by certain partisan artists as a rather free-for-all type of organisation. Several Dadaists failed to understand

⁶⁷ Höch interviewed by Susanne Pagé, in *Hannah Höch. Collages, peintures, aquarelles, gouaches, dessins*, exhibition catalogue (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris: Paris/Nationalgalerie Berlin: Berlin, 1976); p.32.

⁶⁸ Text reproduced from the exhibition catalogue *Hannah Höch* (Galerie Franz: Berlin, 1949). Quoted by Götz Adriani in “Biografische Dokumentation” in *Hannah Höch. Collagen*, exhibition catalogue (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, 1984); p. 52. The original version of this text was published in *Hannah Höch. Fotomontagen, Gemälde, Aquarelle*, exhibition catalogue (DuMont Buchverlag: Cologne, 1980).



Fig. 14 *Die Journalisten*, Hannah Höch, 1925



Fig. 15 *Die Braut*, Hannah Höch, 1933



Fig. 16 *Für ein Fest gemacht*, Hannah Höch, 1936

Höch's participation, demanding faith to their creed. In her own eyes, however, this option implied the refusal to renounce either of the two ways and was a brave and unbiased type of adhesion.

This benign vision of the connection of art with the ordinary contrasts with a period marked by misery, hunger and violence, most of which was specifically aimed at women.⁶⁹ The fear that women aroused among the male population at the end of the war was related to their growing numbers in the labour market and their greater visibility in both cultural and social spheres. The incipient feminisation of German society was greeted with suspicion by many men, who felt threatened and extremely unwilling to give up their patriarchal privileges. In the cultural and literary field, a collection of works underlined the fracture and violation of the female body as a victim, as a dislocated piece of flesh, humiliated to the extreme. Reference should here be made to such works of fiction as the many watercolours, paintings and engravings of Otto Dix, George Grosz and Rudolf Schlichter,⁷⁰ as well as to the treatment of female characters in the novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* by Alfred Döblin.

It must be remembered that, as a result of the development of photography (aerial shots, microscopic images, radiography, etc.), the 1920s and 1930s saw the emergence of countless photographic works. Women played a major role in this field, as exemplified in the works of Germaine Krull, Lotte Jacobi, Florence Henri, Stephanie Brandl, etc.⁷¹

Hannah Höch typically entered the history of art brandishing a pair of scissors, which she expertly used to cut out and manipulate figures, mainly photographic images. Höch's intention, which she also displayed in the field of painting with works such as *Roma*, *Die Journalisten* [The Journalists, 1925] (Fig. 14), *Die Braut* [The Bride, 1933] (Fig. 15) and *Für ein Fest gemacht* [To Have a Party, 1936] (Fig. 16) was not merely to cut up bodies, but to dissect a whole image and then put it together again. She pursued this aim of radical transformation to the end of her days, as can be observed in late photomontages such as *Fremde Schönheit II* [Strange Beauty II, 1966] (Fig. 17), *Das Ewig Weibliche II* [The Eternal Feminine, 1967] and *Entartet* [Degenerate, 1969], which project a critical ironic image of

⁶⁹ This theory is firmly defended by Maria Tatar in *Lustmord. Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1995).

⁷⁰ The recurrent obsession of these painters in portraying women's bodies that have been massacred, reduced to bleeding pieces, is astonishing. Another constant: with few exceptions, women appear as naked prostitutes alongside men protected by the armour of their clothing. There were, however, women artists who portrayed the reality of prostitution with dignity, this being the case of Gerta Overbeck, Else Haensgen-Dingkuhn and Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler. The history of art, frequently written with the blinkers of sexism, has not given these artists the place they deserve. Even Höch produced a watercolour along these lines in 1928. Entitled *Amsterdam* and full of yellows and greens, it portrays two women chatting whilst the supposed customer looks down smiling, a cigarette in his mouth. This is a more ambivalent and ambiguous approach than the histrionic, distorted versions of Grosz and Dix.

⁷¹ In this connection, see the exhibition curated by Ute Eskildsen, *Les dones fotògrafes a la República de Weimar 1919-1933* (Fundació la Caixa: Barcelona, 1995).

women as desirable commodities. It was during this period that Höch also experimented with semi-abstract forms, reshaping objects from the visible world to capture the immutable and intrinsic qualities of their association and juxtaposition – the original source of these objects is difficult to discern. They denote the visual voracity of an artist thirsting for colour images – taken from magazines such as *Life* – that convey energy and fantasy at the same time, as well as an understanding of existence in which the organic⁷² blends with the cosmological. During those years that Höch spent in her house at Heilingsee, North Berlin, she turned her garden into a genuine collage, the epicentre of her personal world. It is interesting to note the analogy with Hausmann's notion of the world as macrocosm, an organic and dynamic whole.

Ever present in this conception of life, despite social conditioning, is an awareness of the importance of personal freedom, of the subject's individuality: a difficult task for a woman in the turbulent times of the Weimar Republic and especially during the dark years of National Socialism.

Femininity and Masculinity in the Post-War Era

The post-war period was accompanied by a slow recovery that allowed the wounds of war to heal⁷³ – at least in part, since there was still the threat of the Cold War and the existence of two blocs. In addition, once the German economy had recovered, more regressive roles and gender values ensued. Femininity and masculinity seemed poles apart, antithetical, which was in sharp contrast to the radical (in terms of her preference for hybridisation) work of Hannah Höch. During the post-war period, Germany, like other Western countries (Great Britain, the United States), continued to criminalise homosexuality. The infamous clause 175 of the Penal Code chastising male homosexual relations was not abolished until 1969.

Hannah Höch has been described as not being a militant feminist.⁷⁴ What does this mean? Should the term “militant feminist” be understood as negative or should it just be seen as a label? If it is understood to mean that she did not belong to a group that promoted women's liberation, then the statement is true, despite the fact that she did decide to show her work alongside that of other women artists in 1931 at the *Frauen in Not* [Desperate Women] show held in Berlin as a form of protest against the famous clause 218 punishing abortion.

⁷² This association of the cosmological with the organic was unusual in that it was almost holistic, were it not for the presence of fragmentation and dismembering. It is already present in early paintings and watercolours such as *Der Weg* (1927), and *Das Gartenfest* (1925-30), and in later works such as *Der Berg* (1939), which reflects certain influences of *pittura metafisica*. See also the *symbolische landschaft* produced in different periods. In this vision of nature, the presence of animals plays a major role: birds, owls, cats, insects.

⁷³ Forgetting the recent past also served its purpose, as denounced by several filmmakers of the 1970s, such as Margarete von Trotta and Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who saw in the new Germany a tangle of lies and the repression of civil and sexual liberties in a climate of terrorism. See *Deutschland im Herbst*, 1978, a film directed by thirteen filmmakers.

⁷⁴ Eberhard Roters, “Bildsymbolik im Werk Hannah Höch”, in *Hannah Höch. Collagen* (IFA: Stuttgart, 1984); p. 70.



Fig. 17 *Fremde Schönheit II*, Hannah Höch, 1966



Fig. 18 *Entführung. Aus einem ethnographische Museum*, Hannah Höch, 1925

This said, one must nevertheless ask whether there is anything more feminist than subverting the representation of the roles, their behaviour and anatomy, through the representation of bodies and features of limbs from both sexes. Feminism, taken as a multifaceted diversity of standpoints, does not imply the outright rejection of men, but rather of the chauvinistic and sexist conduct that breeds discrimination and exclusion.

History provides us with countless examples of injustice, even in the supposedly tranquil realm of friendship and in the supposedly enlightened, forward thinking realm of artistry. Hence, despite his boasting⁷⁵ of his friendship with Hannah Höch, Hans Richter wrote the following:

[...] a quiet girl from the town of Gotha [...] At the first Dada shows in Berlin she only contributed collages.⁷⁶ Her tiny voice would only have been drowned by the roars of her masculine colleagues. But when she came to preside over gatherings in Hausmann's studio she quickly made herself indispensable, both for the sharp contrast between her slightly nun-like grace and the heavyweight challenge presented by her mentor, and for the sandwiches, beer and coffee she managed somehow to conjure up despite the shortage of money. On such evenings she was able to make her small, precise voice heard. When Hausmann proclaimed the doctrine of anti-art, she spoke up for art and for Hannah Hoech [sic]. A good girl.⁷⁷

One might mistakenly assume from these comments that Höch's artistic merits⁷⁸ were practically non-existent, subsumed by the task of procuring provisions and by her docile, "good-girl" image, a term that Richter used repeatedly to describe her.

Published in 1965, at the height of the German economic miracle, Richter's words reflect the continued association of the female condition with a series of epithets charged with prejudice and tainted by chauvinism. Charm, fragility, diffidence and an obliging nature are

⁷⁵ See the photos in the house at Heilingsee, on the outskirts of Berlin, and those taken at several openings. *Hannah Höch. Eine Lebenscollage, III, 1946-1978* (Berlinische Galerie: Berlin, 2001); p. 100, 122 and 131.

⁷⁶ As mentioned in the introduction, Höch preferred the term *photomontage* to describe her work, although she sometimes used *Klebebild*. The word *collage* has too many links with the more formal uses derived by the Cubists, while *photomontage* has been used in association with the idea of photographic mounting (*montieren*) and with the typographical sources of the Berlin Dadaists. More recently, the term *photomontage* has been used in association with the creation of images without fissures, seamless images, produced by manipulating negatives. This was practised by John Heartfield. It was not, however, the technique used by Höch, who always preferred more handcrafted techniques, cutting by hand.

⁷⁷ Richter, op. cit.; p. 132.

⁷⁸ It is worth noting that, although Höch is renowned for being the only active female in the Berlin Dadaist ranks, her artistic production is not confined to the period between 1918 and 1922 (the golden age of Dada), and yet she was dogged by the Dadaist label for decades and even for several years after her death. Likewise, photomontage is the technique or procedure that has earned her a place in the history of art (still small in comparison to her male counterparts), despite the broad range of media she employed, which included painting, drawing, watercolour, textile design and even – although this has been lost – sculpture. Similarly, in terms of the impact of different aesthetic languages, one might claim that not only Dada left its mark on Höch, but also a range of influences and contaminations, including Constructivism, Surrealism and the wide domain of abstraction.

the virtues that adorn the artist, in Richter's opinion. As might easily be concluded, participation, or the status of fellow traveller in one of the most groundbreaking artistic movements of the European avant-garde does not automatically signify the adoption of egalitarian conduct.

One of the pillars of Höch's work is precisely an interest in gender issues and the representation of femininity and masculinity. This is also because Höch's perception, unlike other artistic approaches, deliberately avoids dogmatism, as can be seen throughout her entire career.

Cutting-Up the New Woman

In a post-war country at the hands of economic turmoil, the seductive profile of the modern *Neue Frau* [New Woman] gradually began to take shape, particularly in the media. This was accompanied across the country by the emergence of *Körperkultur* [Body Culture]. Society at large recognised the importance of physical activity in promoting a fit and robust population; the image of man engaged in physical exercise in the midst of nature was thus advertised. Physical activity was therefore seen as a way to alleviate the stress of war.

In Höch's work, the bodies of modern women in motion are a recurring motif that she treats according to her regular cutting-up technique. Though not exclusively, her iconography contains an abundance of female dancers and sportswomen. She was inspired by the sudden prominence in the fields of dance (Nikka Impekoven, Veska Gert, Claudia Pawlowa), cinema, theatre and cabaret (Asta Nielsen, Pola Negru, Anita Berber) and the visual arts (Käthe Kollwitz). She would mix women of different ages and cultures, as seen in the series *Aus einem ethnographische Museum* [From an Ethnographic Museum, 1925] (Fig. 18). There were no discriminatory hierarchies.

In the cutting up of the bodies, the heads usually form the central focus, but also eyes, rouged lips and, needless to say, graceful legs, to such an extent that one might even talk about fetishism⁷⁹ of the lower limbs. This can be observed in the thighs of the dancers in *Nur nicht beiden Beinen auf der Erde stehen* [Never Keep Both Feet on the Ground, 1940]. It is also the case of the greatly admired, by women and men, legs of the German actress Marlene Dietrich, an icon of the liberated woman as genuinely portrayed in Joseph von Sternberg's films.

⁷⁹ Regarding fetishism among women and among lesbians in particular, see Elizabeth Grosz, "Lesbian Fetishism" in: Emily Apter and William Pietz (eds), *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, (Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 1993); pp101-115.



Fig. 19 Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser Dada durch die letzten Weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoch Deutschlands, Hannah Höch, 1919-20



Fig. 20 Dada Rundschau, Höch, 1919

This mobility undoubtedly symbolises freedom, both in the literal sense of the word and in the social sense, thereby coinciding with feminist demands as illustrated in her famous *Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser Dada durch die letzte Weimarere Bierbauchkulturepoch Deutschlands* [Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany, 1919-1920] (Fig. 19) and in *Dada-Rundschau* [Dada Panorama, 1919] (Fig. 20). It is important to point out that these bodies are never complete. They are always dissected, generally focussing on the lower limbs and the head – a segment that lends identity to the new beings created by Höch, often half male and half female.

What was Höch's position on the obvious phenomenon of Body Culture reported in the media? She was undoubtedly fascinated, but also ironic and critical. This is apparent in *Die Gymnastiklehrerin* [Gymnastics Student, 1925], a work in which the slender silhouette of a young woman, her feet resting on weights, is juxtaposed with that of a dumpy woman with a tribal face. They appear to represent two contrasting and irreconcilable worlds. The plumper woman can be identified by her face, the slim gymnast, on the other hand, is devoid of substance, a mere silhouette. She has, thus, no identity. Is it perhaps a prefabricated body? Is there a paradigm between these two women so antagonistic in their physical aspect?

Die Neue Frau, as a creation of the fashion industry, of the changing labour market and the incipient consume society,⁸⁰ appears again and again in Höch's photomontages. The image of the *Neue Frau* as a snob, concerned only with earning large sums of money and going to fashionable dances and soirées, the cinema and cafés, is a pernicious construction of the media of the period, as denounced in 1931 by Hilde Walter.⁸¹ At the time, this commonplace undoubtedly existed in people's minds, and particularly in the minds of those Dadaists who, fascinated by the concept of women as purely cosmetic images, were scornful of equal rights. Höch's 1919 *Da Dandy* (Fig. 21) makes fun of these people displaying a series of women as objects, wearing bracelets, pearl necklaces and high-heeled flower-adorned shoes. These same shoes reappear in *Dada Tanz* [Dada Dance] in 1922, although in this case the mockery is even greater: the woman on the left has the face of a black man. Here, Höch equates the condition of the Black man with that of modern woman – thus drawing a parallel between sexism and racism. In his analysis of the female persona, Freud described the inner world of women's sexual experience as “the dark continent” – a hostile and impenetrable place.

⁸⁰ See the seminal essay by Marsha Meskimmon, *We Weren't Modern Enough. Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism* (IB Tauris: London, 1999). During periods of economic boom working women were tolerated, at times of crisis this was not the case, as manifested by the fact that the more retrograde sectors of the German population used women as scapegoats, blaming them for the breakdown of the family.

⁸¹ “Twilight for Women?”, originally published in *Die Weltbühne* and reproduced in Martin Jay, Anton Kaes, Edward Dmendberg, *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1994); pp 210-211.



Fig. 21 *Da Dandy*, Hannah Höch, 1919



Fig. 22 *Die starcken Männer*, Hannah Höch, 1931

It is true that in *Die Kokette*, 1923-1925, a woman sitting with her legs crossed and wearing elegant shoes and necklaces, bathes in the admiration of two likeable but puerile characters: a boy with a bear's face and a dog with an old man's head. The coquette herself has a head/mask totally at odds with the stylised aestheticism and narcissism of the *Neue Frau*. Höch directs her humour at both sides: the admired and the admirers. Höch approaches issues like gender values and personal and sentimental relationships in their complexity, dissecting them and incorporating them in her work for what they are, as a still photography of their time. Consider, for example, Höch's personal reflection on her work:

The glorification of the modern woman was never something I looked for in my work. I have, however, often been motivated by women's sufferings. When I want to show a vision of the times, I naturally do not forget to portray the interesting contributions made by women. And this has only a marginal relationship with the women's liberation movement. I obviously approve of all women's rights ...⁸²

Höch's great contribution in terms of a new and refreshing look at femininity and masculinity lies in images produced in the period spanning 1925 to 1935. It is not fortuitous that this coincided with Höch's journey to Holland, the country where she had her first solo exhibition (in The Hague) and where she fell in love with Til Brugman, an author of poems, *grotesques*⁸³ and several prose works, and a correspondent for Schwitters's *Merz* and for *De Stijl*. The heteroclit meaning for the grotesque is the acceptance of bastardy, of the impure, i.e. the lack of all modesty in the face of mixture and hybridisation, even of supposedly anti-aesthetic elements. In this respect, it is interesting to compare Til Brugman's poem *She He* (1917-1922?) with the writings of the French author Claude Cahun, in particular with her *Aveux non avendus* (1930). The mixing of the sexes, of the feminine and the masculine, in search of indetermination and sexual nomadism, is fundamental to an appreciation of these poetic reflections.

In 1925, two works particularly stand out for questioning gender roles: *Ertüchtigung* [Education] and *Equilibre* [Equilibrium]. In the former, Höch appears to be telling us that the system of education and socialisation – for which training is metaphor – can play a decisive role in the competing (gender?) values in society, depicted in this case by a bearded old man with the body of a man/woman trying to leap over a hurdle. In *Equilibre*, the sailor suit and *herrschnitt* [man's haircut] of a girl standing on a bar on which she is performing balancing

⁸² Suzanne Pagé, "Interview with Hannah Höch", in the Hannah Höch exhibition catalogue: *Hannah Höch. Collages, peintures, aquarelles, gouaches, dessins* (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris: Paris/Nationalgalerie Berlin: Berlin, 1976); p. 27. This otherwise interesting interview contains a resounding omission: Höch's lesbian relationship with Til Brugman, of which there is no mention whatsoever, throughout the conversation. This is another chapter in the history of the silencing of visible lesbianism.

⁸³ See *Lust & Gratie. Lesbisch cultureel Tijdschrift*, n°18 (Amsterdam, 1988). This issue was dedicated to Hannah Höch and Til Brugman by Mineek Bosch and Myriam Everard.

exercises, probably signify the ambivalence and fragility inherent in strict definitions about appearance and sexuality.

Needless to say, a whole wave of women in the 1920s was imbued with the *garçonne* culture.⁸⁴ The abovementioned photographer Stephanie Brandl photographed one of them, the artist Renée Sintenis. In some cases they were merely following profitable fashions⁸⁵ promoted by famous designers; in others, they were driven by a desire to transgress clothing norms and find a means of visually revealing feminine masculinity and lesbianism.⁸⁶ In yet other cases, it signified an artistic act of audacity, as demonstrated by the photographer and writer Claude Cahun, whose radical haircut, worn from at least 1917, identified her as a lesbian. It is well known that the furious criticism directed at these women who rejected traditional behaviour led to a regression during the 1930s and to the heterosexualisation of the *bubis*, *garçottes* or flappers and that this coincided with a return to the order of the European right and of fascism.

In 1931, Höch produced *Die starken Männer* [The Strong Men] (Fig. 22) where she used an image of the boxing star of the moment, Max Schmeling, from the magazine *Der Querschnitt*. In her work, the boxer is transformed into a mere combination of shadows and silhouettes from which emerge a few sharp threads. These metal strands also occupy the lower part of the photomontage, lending a note of aggression to the ensemble. In the midst of these rigidities, Höch stamps on the boxer's heart⁸⁷ – a sportsman much admired by the Dadaists – the dual face of an old man and a young woman. Ambiguity is thus served. The virility praised by avant-garde artists, with their clear masculine bias, is shattered here, accentuating the equation linking manliness with violence.

Following her break-up with Til Brugman⁸⁸ and her subsequent marriage to Kurt Matthies during the pre-war era, Höch seemed less concerned with questioning gender roles. This interest was taken up again during the mid-1950s. This can be perceived in *Toulouse-Lautrec zugeeignet* [Dedicated to Toulouse-Lautrec] (1957), in which a woman becomes a spectacle, floating in a cabaret. A string of half faces resembling half moons (the symbol of femininity) seem to float aimlessly in the upper part of the photomontage.

⁸⁴ On this matter, see Christine Bard, *Les garçottes. Mode et fantasmes des années folles* (Flammarion : Paris, 1998).

⁸⁵ The glorification of fashion is ridiculed by Höch in a marvellous photomontage entitled *Modenschau* [Fashion Show], 1925-1935. The models look like fairground characters.

⁸⁶ The requirements of the writer Natalie Barney, who favoured feminine women, have been well documented.

⁸⁷ Another boxer, the American Jack Johnson, surrounded by tyres, in an unbecoming pose, appears in *Die Schöne Mädchen* (1919-1920).

⁸⁸ Maria Makela puts this down to tension between Höch and Brugman, perhaps due to the Dutch writer's possessive temperament. This is also reflected in the famous *Dompteuse* [Tamer], 1930, in which Höch is probably identified with a seal, a gentle and affectionate animal.

In this late period of Höch's production, characterised by a fascination with cosmology – i.e. all things organic and aerial – the central theme is women as objects in a world where they are driven by social and aesthetic pressure to use cosmetics and achieve the perfect artificial look. Examples of this can be found in *Für ein Fest gemacht* (Fig. 16) and in *Fremde Schönheit II* (Fig. 17). In the first of these, which portrays what could well be a discotheque, a woman with an incomplete face sits on the right of the image. Although her face is not fully visible, she has made-up hair and prominent lips. This woman, above all a body, emerges almost as an incongruous character lending an ironic note to the festive context. In the second work, a model's face has been replaced by a sort of Peruvian terracotta mask. The figure, which is neither idealised nor fits the canons of feminine beauty, strolls against a pinkish background adorned with plants and flowers.

Hannah Höch was a child of her time, living her life with élan and dedication. She never avoided conflict demonstrating a demeanour that could be characterised by eagerness, rage and enthusiasm, as well as detachment, scepticism and irony. She was active in politics, culture and history throughout her life. She studied contemporary art, used styles, isms and trends as stimuli, experimented with them – and from them, with her inexhaustible imagination, she created something of her own, something new. Entirely in passion and with an easy hand, this artist helped write twentieth century art history with her photomontages.

Nonetheless, there is continuity in her work. This continuity is in her work with photomontage, the technique that Hannah Höch had a major part in “inventing” around 1919 as the most important form of expression of the Dadaistic revolution and that she, as opposed to all her other Dadaistic colleagues, remained true to all of her life with a rare consistency. From the beginning, she considered this visual language to be an art form equal to painting or graphics. To give up her place in the liberal arts, the artistic term had to be broadened, and its established boundaries either blurred or dissolved. This belief in photomontage as an equal form of artistic expression evidently gave Hannah Höch her voice. Whenever the opportunity arose, she also propagated this belief in written or oral statements – and this at a time when the artistic character of montages had yet to be recognised. There is a text dated 1933, drafted on the occasion of a photomontage exhibition in Brno, in which the artist, after a historical summary, emphasises the importance of “today's” photomontages, then goes on to say:

And finally, in contrast to the “Applied” Montages discussed so far, I now come to what we might call “Free Photomontage”. This is to say, an art form that has grown out of photography and the many ways it can be treated opens a new and absolutely fantastic area for creative people. A wondrous new territory, the discovery of which requires a lack of inhibition, though not a lack of discipline. Within these newly discovered possibilities, the laws of form and colour that characterise a detached scene also count. If we want to compel this “photo material” toward new creations, we must prepare ourselves for a journey of discovery, we must begin without assumptions, and, above all, be receptive to the

random impulses which, here more than anywhere else, are ready to set our imagination in motion.⁸⁹

The creation of a photomontage is thus based on some basic principles: impartiality, curiosity and “uninhibitedness” to start with, and discipline and detachment in the realisation. Even if, as Höch believed, each photomontage is also based on spontaneous ideas or some accidental stimulus, the entire development process is calculated and controlled. “Then, the serious and difficult work begins: to discover what this entails. This is no longer random. It means a disciplined search, assembly, and repeated scrutiny.”⁹⁰

Grosz and Heartfield

In 1930, Raoul Hausmann recounted the Dadaists’ decision to take on personas:

The title *Monteur-Dada* was discovered by Grosz ... At that time, in July 1919, we all received typeset visiting cards from John Heartfield with our titles: Baader, who had named himself OberDada in 1918 in Jacobson’s *Weltbühne*, Huelsenbeck, who named himself World Dada, I, who called myself Dadasoph, Heartfield MonteurDada, Grosz received the title Marshal and Mehring became PipiDada. Those are the historical facts.⁹¹

If this account is correct, then the use of *Monteurdada* seems above all part of a Dada tactic intended to establish for the artist a position outside the conventions he was provided with in artists’ cultural institutions and to foster new meanings from his work.

What George Grosz and John Heartfield held in common can be seen in the “corrected masterpieces” exhibited at the 1920 Dada-Messe under the authorship “Grosz-Heartfield mont.” – the abbreviation referring to “Monteur” (fitter, assembler). The “Grosz-Heartfield mont.” signature has sparked the popular argument that the verb “montieren” [to assemble, to fit or to mount] designates the recognition of a crucial mechanical aspect potentially available in the technical production of their works which had decisive anti-artistic ramifications.⁹² Yet the montage technique employed consistently by Grosz and Heartfield from *Preisaußschreiben!* (Fig. 6) through to *Dada-amerika* (Fig. 23), was apparently unaltered by the term *montieren*, which came halfway in its development. Heartfield’s *Preisaußschreiben!*,

⁸⁹ Karoline Hille, “...This never-ending evolution” Reflected in her Art – Hannah Höch in the 20th century”. In: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, *Hannah Höch*, exhibition catalogue (20th January – 11th April 2004 (Ediciones Aldeasa: Madrid, 2004); pp.323.

⁹⁰ See Suzanne Pagé, “Interview with Hannah Höch. Berlin 18th November 1975” in: *Das Interview* – typescript, page 11, with handwritten corrections and notes by Höch. The passage is not found in the printed version of the interview in the Hannah Höch exhibition catalogue: *Collages, Paintings, Watercolours, Gouache, Drawings* (Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris 1976). Höch’s complete answer to Pagé’s question: “Do you have a plan when you start a photomontage?” is also quoted in Karoline Hille, “Ein kaleidoscop der unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten: su Hannah Höchs Photomontagen nach 1945” in: Merkert and Züchner, op.cit.; p. 163.

⁹¹ In a letter from Hausmann to Tschichold dated 9th April 1930 (Bolliger Collection, Zurich).

⁹² See Annegret Jürgens-Kirchhoff, *Technik und Tendenz der Montage in der bildenden Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*. (Anabas: Gießen/Lahn, 1978); pp 1-13; and Marianne Stockebrand, *Collage: Untersuchungen zur Intention des Verfahrens bei Raoul Hausmann* (Munich: Institut für Kunstgeschichte der Universität München, July 1974); p.26ff.

can be compared with a similar layout of a fan of faces rendered conventionally in an anonymous drawing taken from the newspaper which appeared in *Der Sturm* in 1912 (as part of the rebuttal to criticism of Kandinsky's "pictures without things"). Heartfield was "the enemy of the picture" to the extent that he attempted to "paint with the means of film": he so disrupted scale and unity in *Life and Work in Universal City, 12.05 Noon* (Fig. 24) that "it is best to walk 40 steps back through the wall (mind the step!)", as Herzfelde advised in the Dada-Messe catalogue.⁹³

Herzfelde maintained that Heartfield's title *Monteur* was "not due to his working technique" but related to his preference for wearing a *Monteuranzug* (overalls): "he did not want to look like an artist but not like an advertising man either".⁹⁴ Grosz corroborated this account in his statement that he had discovered the term *Monteur* for Heartfield "who constantly wore an old blue suit and whose activity in our association was reminiscent mostly of montieren".⁹⁵ The importance of social posturing should not be underestimated for these men who anglicised their names, altered their daily appearance, and modified their rituals of behaviour in protest against surrounding norms.

Photography as Dynamic Montage

The earliest collage using photographs ever published stem from the Grosz-Heartfield collaboration. Heartfield's *Preisausschreiben!* (Fig. 6) was not then associated with Dada but made for the cover of the protest paper *Jedermann sein einer Fussball* (February 1919). Remarkable for the purity of its approach, it employs photographs directly without any hint of drawing or painting. A fan forms the background upon which were superimposed "six photographic portraits of members of the Ebert/Scheidemann government as well as – on the handle of the fan – Noske, Ludendorff, Erzberger."⁹⁶ Seventy-six hundred copies of the paper were sold on the Berlin streets, an accomplishment for which Wieland Herzfelde, founder of

⁹³ "Trete man am besten 40 Schritte durch die Wand (Achtung, Stufe!) zurück. Dann ergibt sich von selbst, dass der Dadaist John Heartfield der Feind des Bildes ist", *Erste Internationale Dada-Messe. Ausstellung und Verkauf Dadaistischer Erzeugnisse. Veranstaltet von Marschall G. Grosz, Dadasoph Raoul Hausmann, MonteurDada John Heartfield. Katalog, exhibition catalogue* (Berlin, 1920).

⁹⁴ "John wurde von seinen Freunden zwar schon im Kriege Monteur genannt, aber nicht seiner Arbeitstechnik wegen, sondern weil er einen Monteuranzug zu tragen pflegte. Er wollte nicht wie ein Künstler aussehen, aber auch nicht wie ein Werbefachmann." in Heartfield, *op.cit.* (2002); p.95.

⁹⁵ "Das Wort "Monteur" erfand ich für Heartfield, der dauernd in einem alten blauen Anzug auftrat und dessen Tätigkeit in unserer Gemeinschaft am meisten an montieren erinnerte." In a letter from George Grosz to Franz Roh dated 1929 and published in Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold, *Foto-Auge* (Verlag Ernst Wasmuth: Tübingen, 1973).

⁹⁶ "Sechs Porträtfotos von Mitgliedern der Regierung Ebert/Scheidemann, sowie – auf dem Griff des Fächers – Noske, Ludendorff, Erzberger". Wieland Herzfelde, "George Grosz, John Heartfield, Erwin Piscator, Dada und die Folgen – oder Die Mächte der Freundschaft", *Sinn und Form*, volume 23, number 6 (1971); pp1224-1251.

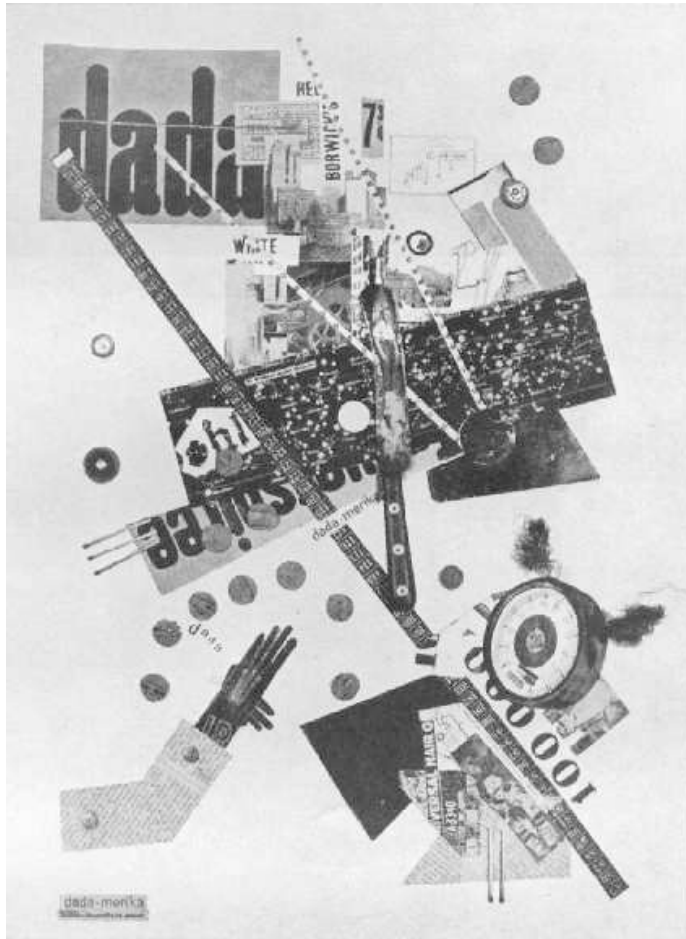


Fig.23 *Dada-merika*, George Grosz and John Heartfield, 1919

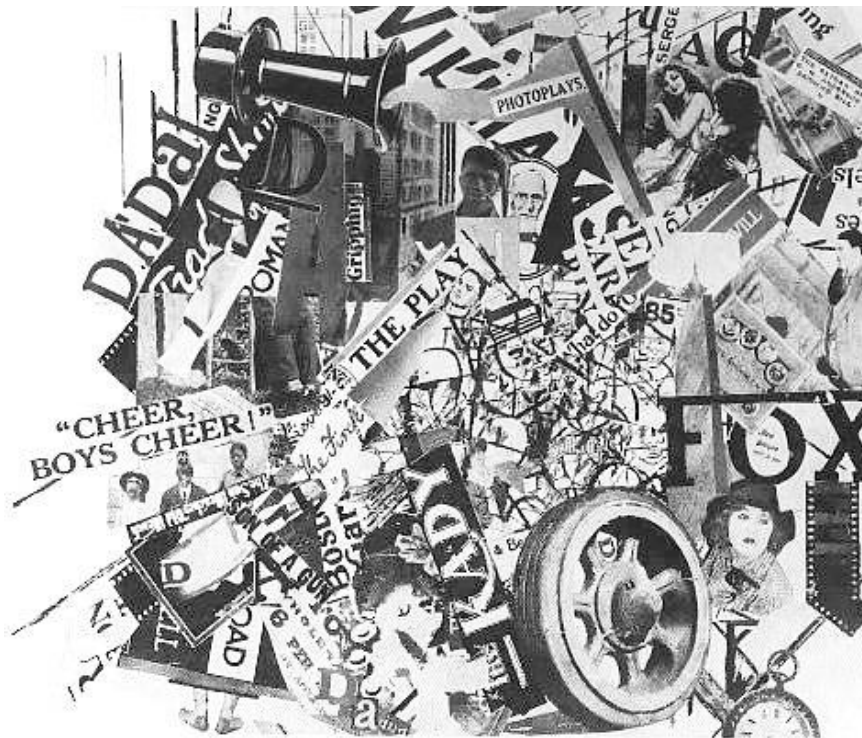


Fig. 24 *Life and Work in Universal City, 12.05 Noon*, George Grosz and John Heartfield, 1919

the Malik verlag,⁹⁷ was later arrested and briefly imprisoned.

In contrast with Heartfield's use of direct means, Grosz's development over the course of 1919 and early 1920 involved the absorption of photographs and newspaper clippings into his primary medium of drawing. Accordingly, his incorporation of collage occurs in a logical series of artistic decisions, despite the frequent anti-aesthetic statements made in the Dada Club "propaganda". Grosz's content broadened as he mined the world of mass media – along with its support structure in the modern industrialised city-state – for examples of hypocrisy and injustice. After creating his *Salumith* collage in 1917, Grosz had been largely occupied with the approach refined in his paintings *Dedication to Oskar Panizza* (Fig. 28) and *Germany, a Winter's Tale* (Fig. 29), both of which present jumbled and dynamic compositions based on Futurism and a fragmentary and disparate reality owing a good deal to Cubist collage.⁹⁸ Although the content is very different, Grosz's placing of an actual front page from the conservative Berlin *Lokal-Anzeiger* in his *Germany, a Winter's Tale*, like Dix's use of newspapers in his *War Cripples*⁹⁹, falls within the tradition initiated by Cubism and Futurism. As Richard Hiepe has remarked, both Grosz's paintings and Heartfield's collages, as early as 1915, "point [...] more to Cubist and Futurist forerunners than to the then not yet fully developed collages of the Zurich Dada movement, with which they would always be connected"¹⁰⁰. In particular, both Grosz and Heartfield were strongly influenced by Carlo Carrà.¹⁰¹ If any one source could be named which forged the Grosz-Heartfield bond, it would be Carrà's *Funerali dell'anarchio Galli* (1911) which was "treasured" by Heartfield and possibly an influence on Grosz's *Dedication to Oskar Panizza*.¹⁰² Despite the all too frequent description of Berlin photomontage as chaotic, it turned out often to be logical in contrast with the chaotic *typo-montages* of Ardengo Soffici and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti of 1914-15 or with other Dada collages with illogical structures.¹⁰³

Returning to the photomontage technique only late in 1919, Grosz used a collage of newspaper clippings simply as a backdrop for his biting caricatures of a complacent capitalist and his scheming prostitute companion in *Work and Do Not Despair!* (Fig. 27) for the cover

⁹⁷ The Malik verlag was one of the most important German publishing houses of the twentieth century. It aligned itself to political and aesthetic avant-garde art, as well as to communist literature. It existed from 1916 to 1947.

⁹⁸ See Hans Hess, *George Grosz* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1985); p. 76 and p. 82.

⁹⁹ See the coloured illustrations in Schmied, Wieland (ed.) *Neue Sachlichkeit and German Realism of the Twenties*, exhibition catalogue (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978); p.40 and p.34.

¹⁰⁰ Carl-Albrecht Haenlein (ed.) *Dada Photographie und Photocollage* (Kestner-Gesellschaft: Hanover, 1979); p.32.

¹⁰¹ "In my efforts to develop a clear and simple style I can't help drawing closer to Carrà". Victor Miesel, *Voices of German Expressionism* (Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, 1970); p.187.

¹⁰² "Aus einem Interview mit Heartfield" in Heartfield, op. cit. (2002); p.464

¹⁰³ See Richard Hiepe, "Über Photographie", in Carl-Albrecht Haenlein (ed.), *Dada Photographie und Photocollage* (Kestner-Gesellschaft: Hanover, 1979); p.32.



Fig. 25 *To Oskar Panizza*, George Grosz, 1917-18

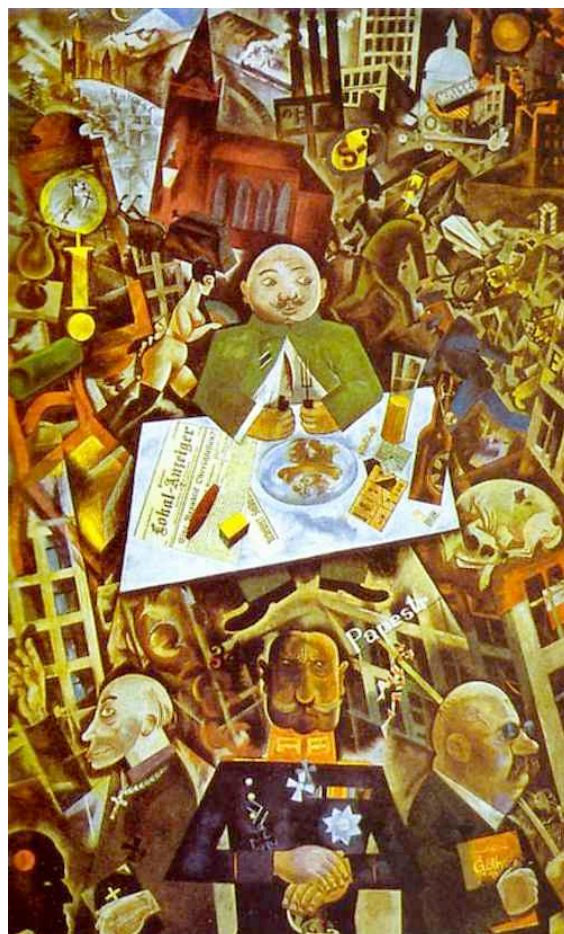


Fig. 26 *Germany. A Winter's Tale*, George Grosz, 1917-19

of *Der blutige Ernst* 4. While the collage background is a dynamic jumble of references to film, dance and the cabaret and suggests the filmic vision Heartfield and himself attempted in *Life and Work in Universal City, 12.05 Noon* (Fig. 24), it is essentially a juxtaposition of a drawing on a collaged background. Strongly influenced by Heartfield, and possibly by Johannes Baader, Grosz subsequently experimented with newspaper clippings, diagrams and photographs, adjusting them to the Futurist-derived dynamism so successfully handled in such drawings as *Schulze psychoanalysiert* (*Der blutige Ernst* 6, 6th February 1920). His collage, *Schulzens Seele*, presented a kind of cross section of the world as mediated through the newspaper – a medium which itself conveys a collage of reality.¹⁰⁴ Grosz's collage makes references to the whole front of vernacular and high culture including the Minister of the Interior, Gustav Noske, Tolstoy, mass murder, popular slogans, Gothic architecture, advertisements and the outspoken rejection in Huelsenbeck's 1918 Dada manifesto: "Nein! Nein! Nein! Nein!" Grosz and Heartfield saw in newspapers and photographs primarily another vernacular source; collage seen as the poor man's art.¹⁰⁵ Throughout the Dada era, Grosz and Heartfield treated the sources only as would highly sophisticated avant-garde artists.

When Grosz became more comfortable with the collage technique in *The Guilty One Remains Unknown* (Fig. 28), he accomplished a tight unity through increased restraints and sparseness and a reduction of the fragmentary photographs and texts to discrete units which he coerced back into a Cubo-Futurist armature. For a few months in 1920, in such works as *The Diamond Racketeer*, Grosz fought against "Futurist romantic dynamism" by "suppressing color" and using line "in an impersonal, photographic way",¹⁰⁶ an attitude seen also in Hausmann's dry draughtsman's style. This control is the concession Grosz made to the machine character of his materials and it affected his composition as much as any "exploding of perception" through "discontinuity".¹⁰⁷

While the photomontage *Korrigierter Picasso* appears to be a critique primarily of the materials and subject matter of Cubism, it openly accepts and maintains an indebtedness to the collage technique. The related *Henri Rousseau Selbstbildnis* is another "corrected masterpiece" which presents a reproduction of Henri Rousseau's *Myself, Portrait Landscape* of 1890 in which the Douanier has been replaced by a photograph of Hausmann. It comments more directly and ironically on the identity of the artist by augmenting the setting with added photographs. A fashionable Hausmann, rendered photographically, seems to call into question the use of the palette and paintbrush which he holds in his hands.

¹⁰⁴ Hans-Georg Kemp, *Vom Expressionismus zum Dadaismus* (Scriptor-Verlag: Kronberg, 1974); p.210.

¹⁰⁵ Manuela Hoelterhoff, "Heartfield's Contempt", *Artforum*, volume 15, number 3 (November 1976); p.61.

¹⁰⁶ Miesel, op. cit.; p.187.

¹⁰⁷ Hanne Bergius, "Zur Wahrnehmung und Wahrnehmungskritik im Berliner Dadaismus", *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter*, number 55 (1975); p. 243.



Fig. 27 *Work and Do Not Despair!*, George Grosz, 1920



Fig. 28 *The Guilty One Remains Unknown*, Grosz, 1919



Fig. 29 *Sonniges Land*, George Grosz, 1920

Grosz and Heartfield used the photograph as a material fact which they accepted into the creative process as raw material, relieving them of the obligation of depicting reality. The photograph became a crucial ingredient in what Grosz called his *materialisations* in the subtitle of a 1922 collection of his photocollages.¹⁰⁸ And Heartfield abandoned traditional techniques of artistic handiwork altogether in favour of the montages of photographs. This is seen in the *Preisausschreiben!* (Fig. 6) and in his cover for *Der Dada 3* (Fig. 15), which presents a dynamic composition based entirely on the qualities of the materials themselves. This approach is explained in Herzfelde's introduction to the Dada-Messe catalogue:

The Dadaists say: while earlier huge quantities of time, love, and effort were spent on painting a body, flower, a hat, a cast shadow etc., we need only take scissors and cut out the paintings, photographic reproductions of all of these things we need, and as far as something of smaller size is concerned, we don't need representation at all but take the things themselves, e.g., pocket knives, ash trays, books, etc., merely things.¹⁰⁹

In his account to Tschichold, Hausmann cited the cover for *Der Dada 3* and the collage *Dada-merika* as the first productions of the "Grosz-Heartfield Konzern".¹¹⁰ The absence of Heartfield's pseudonym in his earlier collage for *Jedermann sein eigener Fussball*, and generally of any pseudonym in the Malik Verlag protest paper, *Die Pleite* (Bankruptcy), would seem to support Hausmann's claim. While the cover for *Der Dada 3* and a related work of 1919, *Sonniges Land* (used also as a cover for Huelsenbeck's book of 1920, *Dada siegt!*),¹¹¹ remains within the technique of the photomontage, *Dada-merika* (Fig. 23) extends the process, incorporating "merely things" – a measuring tape, knife, tufts of hair, coins, and matches – and is a step toward the manikin assemblages of the "Grosz-Heartfield Konzern" shown at the Dada-Messe. This important transitional work shows how actual objects are carefully absorbed into the tight structure of the composition: the knife blade has a photograph applied over it, the measuring tape is covered by paper elements in several places. As in *Sonniges Land* (Fig. 29), reproductions of religious art, fragments of American newspapers (possibly sent by Grosz's brother-in-law in San Francisco), machine imagery and

¹⁰⁸ George Grosz, *Mit Pinsel und Schere: Sieben Materialisationen* (Berlin: Malik Verlag, 1922), book of monochrome reproductions of watercolour collages employing photographic fragments.

¹⁰⁹ "Die Dadaisten sagen: Wenn früher Unmengen von Zeit, Liebe und Anstrengung auf das Malesn eines Körpers, einer Blume, eines Hutes, eines Schlagschattens usw. Verwandt wurden, so brauchen wir nur die Schere zu nehmen und uns unter den Malereien, photographischen Darstellungen all dieser Dinge ausschneiden, was wir brauchen; handelt es sich um Dinge geringeren Umfanges, so brauchen wir auch gar nicht Darstellungen, sondern nehmen die Gegenstände selbst, z.B. Taschenmesser, Aschenbecker, Bücher, etc., lauter Sachen" translated from John Heartfield, *Der Schnitt entlang der Zeit* (Verlag der Kunst: Dresden, 2002); p.41.

¹¹⁰ Letter from Hausmann to Tschichold dated 9th April 1930, Bolliger Collection, Zurich.

¹¹¹ Illustrated in Eckhard Siepmann, *Montage: John Heartfield vom Club Dada zur Arbeiter-Illustrierten Zeitung. Dokumente, Analysen, Berichte* (Berlin: Elefant Press, 1977); p.72. Huelsenbeck's *Dada Siegt!* is illustrated in Willy Verkauf, *Dada: Monograph of a Movement* (New York: George Witterborn, n.d.); p.61.

clippings from Dada publications are also included. The cluster of objects is placed on a plain background with little attempt to establish a spatial setting of the sort to be seen later in the photomontages of Heartfield and Hausmann.

Heartfield's Propaganda Photomontages

Photomontage, as political propaganda, reached its greatest heights in the period between World War I and World War II, and like many uses of photography it originated in the nineteenth century. For example, in 1871, following the defeat of the Paris Commune (which had launched a revolt against the Versailles government to ward off the possible restoration of the monarchy), French officials falsely documented atrocities committed by communards through photographs that were retouched with cut and pasted additions. The political impact of the photomontage did not go unnoticed by the Dadaists

Many of the Dadaists believed in a political as well as an aesthetic revolution. Dada itself remained “a matter of the spirit and as such could accept no master, neither the aristocrat nor the proletarian”;¹¹² therefore, “the more these people were thrown in the revolutionary movement of the proletariat, the more they lost their identity as Dadaists”.¹¹³ Heartfield, in association with his brother Wieland Herzfelde and with George Grosz, published the avant-garde periodical *Neue Jugend* and used entirely new typographic ideas in which old engravings were thrown together in a Joycean free-association – a technique which was later employed successfully at the Bauhaus and finally adopted widely by commercial artists, but which was brilliantly original in 1917.

Yet, during the 1920s, Heartfield did book jackets in both typography and photomontage for the Malik verlag which published what constituted the best of the world's left-wing literature at the time, from Upton Sinclair to Maksim Gorky and Ilya Ehrenburg, as well as portfolios and lithographs by George Grosz. The Malik verlag flourished throughout the twenties and thirties, supporting causes of the political Left and the German Communist Party. Photomontage covers for its books, designed by Heartfield, popularised the medium while transforming the artistic technique into a propaganda tool. As Raoul Hausmann points out in his essay *Peinture nouvelle et photomontage*:

The technique of photomontage markedly simplified itself according to its field of implementation. Above all its area of implementation is political propaganda and commercial advertisement. The clarity called for by political or commercial slogans will increasingly influence its capacity to counterbalance the most startling contrasts, and depart from the whims of early times [...] ¹¹⁴

¹¹² Richard Huelsenbeck, “Dada Manifesto 1949”, in Robert Motherwell (ed.), *The Dada Painters and Poets* (London: Belknap Press, 1979).

¹¹³ Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Institute of Design, 1947); p.318.

¹¹⁴ “La technique du photomontage s’est sensiblement simplifiée en raison de son champ d’application. Son domaine d’application est surtout la propagande politique et la publicité commerciale. La clarté

When Heartfield's photomontages became politicised, the putting across of the political message became all important; experimentation with form – the characteristic of avant-garde photomontage – was taken a step further. Form was refined in order for content to be understood effectively. Mastering this form as the struggles between the German Communists and the Nazis were played out during the twenties and early thirties, Heartfield was soon acknowledged as the master of political photomontage.¹¹⁵ Sergei Tretiakov describes the evolution of Heartfield's art, from Dada to propaganda:

A photomontage by the Dadaist Heartfield consisted of a large number of small details. But over time Heartfield's language became increasingly laconic, his photomontages were constructed more and more sparingly, greater expressiveness being achieved by fewer elements. His most perfect works are those which involve no more than two elements. We should not forget that a photomontage is not necessarily a montage of photographs. No – it may be a photo and a photo, a photo and text, a photo and paint, a photo and a drawing. He [Heartfield] himself said: "Often it is enough to touch a photograph with a tiny spot of color to turn it into a photomontage, a work of art of a special kind."¹¹⁶

As Germany suffered from inflation, depression and the immediate threat of fascism, Heartfield's art increasingly showed an aggressively political nature and "he consciously placed photography in the service of political agitation".¹¹⁷ As the political situation grew more acute, Heartfield's art grew more acrid and simultaneously more mature. In 1929, he created his *The Face of Fascism*, a montage which rapidly spread all over Europe. A skull-like face of Mussolini is eloquently surrounded by his corrupt backers and his dead victims. The peculiar character of Heartfield's art is evident in a photomontage such as this and can clearly be distinguished from other forms such as collage. The Cubists had revived the eighteenth-century technique of collage for reasons of formal structure and also to postulate questions about the nature of reality. Schwitters's *Merz* collages salvaged the discards from the rubbish bin, commenting on the jetsam of civilisation. They "established disparaged values" as Jean Dubuffet might have said, and became important to later artists concerned with junk culture. For his part, Heartfield worked with recycled material, yet rationally and purposefully in his search for photographic cut-outs, which he assembled so as to evoke the most highly charged thematic associations in the spectator. In this respect, his political art is more clearly in line with Futurist collage than with the haphazard work of some of his former Dada colleagues such as Hans Arp and Max Ernst, if only by the intended impact of his works on the masses. Heartfield used photomontage for purposes of bitter social protest and political

nécessaire qu'exigent les slogans politiques ou commerciaux influencera de plus en plus sur ses moyens de contrebalancer les contrastes les plus saisissants, et éloignera les caprices de première heure [...]" in Hausmann (1958), op. cit.; pp 48-49.

¹¹⁵ See Douglas Kahn, *John Heartfield: Art and Mass Media* (New York: Tanam Press, 1985); Peter Pachnicke and Klaus Honnef (eds), *John Heartfield* (New York: Abrams, 1992); and Matthew Teitelbaum (ed.), *Montage and Modern Life 1919-1942* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992).

¹¹⁶ Pachnicke and Honnef, op. cit.; p.291.

¹¹⁷ Wieland Herzfelde, *John Heartfield* (Leipzig: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1962); p.24

propaganda. He turned to the newest, the least traditionally encumbered medium to comment on his time with powerful anger and great artistic talent. “The intolerable aspects of events is the motor of his art,” said the writer Oskar Maria Graf about his friend Heartfield, and, indeed, this was how he created the most memorable images of Hitler swallowing gold coins and cackling hollow sounds in *Adolf – the Superman – Who Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk* (Fig. 30), or raising his arm in the Nazi salute in *Millions Stand Behind Me* (Fig. 31). A little over a year after Hitler’s assumption of power, in April 1934, we see the Führer holding a Nazi version of the hammer and sickle as he speaks to German workers, while his propaganda chief Goebbels drapes the beard of Karl Marx round him; or again, in 1936, Hitler sharpens his knife to kill the Gallic Cock while he smirkingly poses as the innocent vegetarian. These photomontages merge in a powerful photo/text fusion, as described by Tretakyov:

Text is very essential to Heartfield’s montages. Sometimes, in a complex montage, Heartfield inserts several texts, hedging, as it were, the path followed by his caricature to ensure that it reaches its target. The interaction of photo and text is especially evident in his renowned election poster of an open hand. The number 5 of the communist electoral list is burned by all possible means into the consciousness of those to whom the poster is addressed. It is shouted by the number 5 and repeated by the word five and the open palm. But even here the most important thing – to remind the reader once again – is that the starting point of the photomontage is a reinterpretation of the photograph. The five fingers are not simply a representation of the number five, but they have a double meaning – the number of the list and a hand preparing to seize the enemy. The second meaning is emphasized by the slogan, and Heartfield even modified the photograph of the hand itself in the interests of expressiveness, lengthening the fingers where necessary and deflecting the thumb more acutely to one side.¹¹⁸

After the burning of the Reichstag, a crime altogether almost certainly engineered by Goering and Goebbels in order to incarcerate the Communists, John Heartfield made the brutally powerful montage of *Goering the Hangman* (Fig. 32), the human bloodhound with his axe standing in front of the burning parliament. Soon thereafter, Heartfield executed another masterpiece in the same vein, showing the mutilated and broken figure of Justice who, in place of blindfolded eyes, has a bandaged head in order to illustrate Goering’s words from the trial of the Reichstag fire: “For me Justice is something bloody” (*The Executioner and Justice*, Fig. 33). Produced in March 1934, another montage *Blood and Iron* (Fig. 34) refers to another trial in which a brown shirt was acquitted by a German court of justice for stabbing a worker to death with the SA’s “Dagger of Honour” because the worker had dared insult his uniform. In *Blood and Iron*, the swastika is formed by four blood-soaked axes. Like

¹¹⁸ Pachnicke and Honnef, op. cit.; p.294.



Fig.30 Adolf – the superman – who swallows gold and Spouts junk, John Heartfield, 1932



Fig. 31 Millions Stand Behind Me, John Heartfield, 1932



Fig.32 *Goering the Hangman*, John Heartfield, 1933

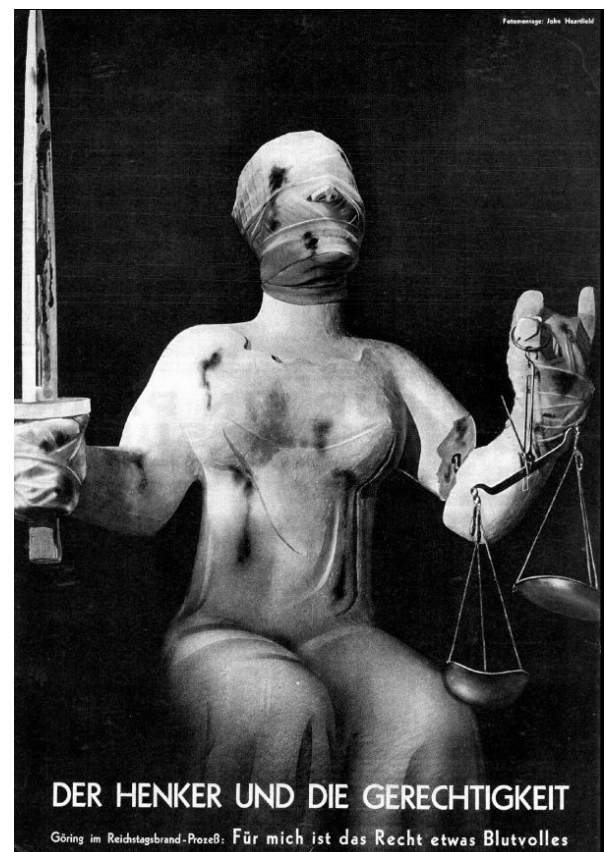


Fig. 33 *The Executioner and Justice*, John Heartfield, 1933

Sergei Eisenstein's films, Heartfield's photomontages use diametrically opposite images to provoke a conflict in the spectator which will give rise to a third synthetic image that is often stronger in its associations than the sum of its parts. To form another swastika in June 1933, he used a brutal-looking Nazi screwing additional pieces of wood to Thorwaldsen's Cross of Golgotha. Heartfield's poignant caption reads: "The Cross was still not heavy enough".

One of his strongest works of warning is the photomontage of the skeleton hand with bomber planes issuing from its five fingers, raised hugely over the destroyed city with bodies of dead children in the foreground (*This Is the Heil They Bring!*, Fig. 35). This work was horribly prophetic when first published during the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Later on, during the Allied bombings of German cities Heartfield re-issued it under the heading *The Benefit Accomplished by Air Raids from the Point of View of Racial Selection and Social Hygiene*, with a cynical clipping from a current number of *Berlin Journal for Biology and Race Research*: "The densely populated sections of cities suffer most acutely in air raids. Since these areas are inhabited for the most part by the ragged proletariat, society will thus be rid of these elements. One-ton bombs not only cause death but also very frequently produce madness. People with weak nerves cannot stand such shocks. That makes it possible for us to find out who the neurotics are. Then the only thing that remains is to sterilize such people. Thereby the purity of the race is guaranteed".¹¹⁹

These photomontages are far removed from the early work of the Dada rebellion. They are images of piercing simplicity created from a deep conviction in order to be political weapons. They fulfil what Picasso once considered to be the purpose of painting: they are indeed "instruments of war for attack and defence against the enemy".¹²⁰ Recognising the power of Heartfield's weapons, the Nazis determined upon his arrest very early on, but in the spring of 1933 he escaped to Prague where he immediately resumed his work of accusation against Nazi terror. In fact, a good many of his most powerful political posters were made during his years of exile there. An international diplomatic incident was precipitated when the leading Czech artists' association exhibited his work in Prague in 1934, causing the Nazi government to demand the withdrawal of many of his political posters. Wieland Herzfelde's monograph documents this case in fascinating detail. The Czech government maintained its principles of free expression as long as it could, but its final capitulation to Hitler's demands was certainly prophetic of later events. Heartfield's case, however, had become a matter of

¹¹⁹ Peter Selz, "John Heartfield's Photomontages", in *The Massachusetts Review*, IV, 2 (Winter 1963), pp 309-336.

¹²⁰ Picasso's written statement of March 24, 1945 quoted in Alfred Barr's *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946); p.248.

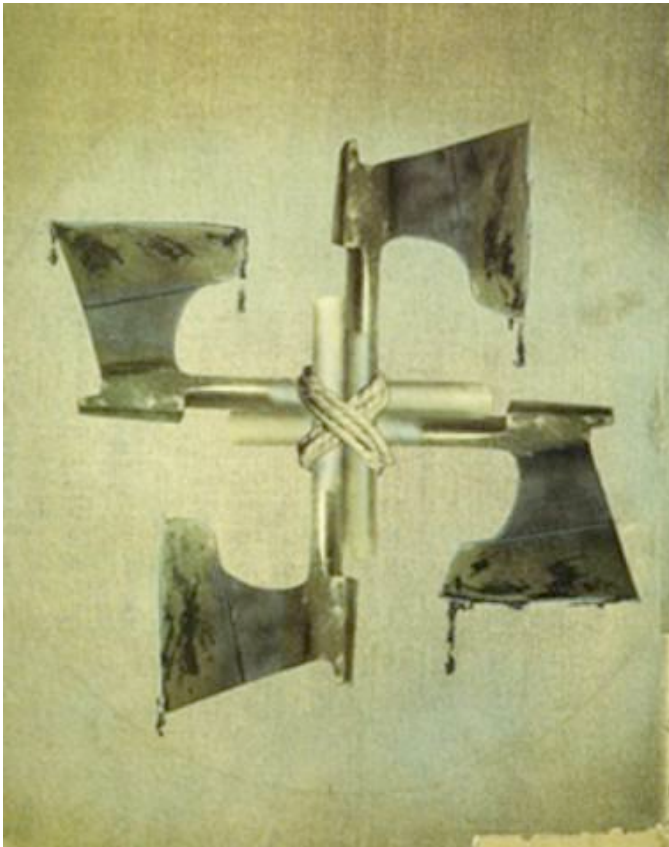


Fig. 34 *Blood and Iron*, John Heartfield, 1934



Fig. 35 *This is the Heil They Bring*, Heartfield, 1934

international morality, and Paul Signac as leader of the *Indépendants* in Paris wrote to his friends in Prague in 1934:

I join you in protesting against the unjust and stupid persecution to which my colleague John Heartfield has fallen victim. My whole life long I have been fighting for the freedom of art and therefore I do not need to stress the fact particularly that I am with you wholeheartedly.

I am prepared to contribute my share in organising a French exhibition of our friend's works. I hope that many French artists will join you and help you. From all sides the tide of reaction is rising. The club is poised for battle against the freedom of the spirit. Let us unite to defend ourselves.¹²¹

The French exhibition was, in fact, organised in the spring of 1935. For it, Louis Aragon wrote an extensive article on John Heartfield and the nature of his revolutionary achievements. This important essay brilliantly summarises the philosophy behind Heartfield's work:

John Heartfield is one of those who expressed the strongest doubts about painting, especially its technical aspects. He is one of those who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, recognised the evanescent character, within the actual history of painting, of oil painting which has only been in existence for a few centuries and seems to us to be painting *per se*, but which can abdicate at any time to a technique which is new and more in accord with contemporary life, with mankind today. We know that cubism was, among other things, a reaction of painters to the invention of photography. The photograph and the cinema made it seem childish to strive for *verisimilitude*. By means of these new technical accomplishments they created a conception of art which led some to attack naturalism and others to redefine reality. With Léger it led to decorative art, with Mondrian to abstraction, with Picabia to the organisation of mundane evening entertainment on the Riviera.

But towards the end of the war, several men in Germany (Grosz, Heartfield, Ernst) were led through the critique of painting to a spirit which was quite different from the cubists, who pasted a piece of newspaper or a matchbox in the middle of the picture to give them a foothold in reality. For them the photograph stood as a challenge to painting and was released from its imitative function and used for novel expressive purposes [...]

John Heartfield *today knows how to salute beauty*. He knows how to create those images which are the very beauty of our time, since they represent the cry of the masses – the representation of the people's struggle against the brown hangman with his gusset full of gold coins. He knows how to create these realistic images of our life and struggle, which are arresting and gripping for millions of people who themselves are a part of that life and struggle. His art is art in Lenin's sense for it is a weapon in the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat. John Heartfield *today knows how to salute beauty*. Because he speaks for the countless oppressed people throughout the world, and this without depreciating for a moment the magnificent tone of his voice, without debasing the majestic poetry of his tremendous imagination. *Without diminishing the quality of his work*. Master of a technique entirely his own invention, a technique which uses for its palette the whole range of impressions from the world of actuality; never imposing a rein on his spirit, blending his figures at will, he knows no signpost other than dialectical materialism, none

¹²¹ Wieland Herzfelde, *John Heartfield* (VEB Verlag der Kunst: Leipzig, 1962); p.59.

other than the reality of the historical process, which he translates into black and white and fills with the anger of battle.¹²²

While serving as political propaganda, Heartfield's photomontages are at their best when they engage in a critique of right-wing politics, effectively unmasking its practices, slogans and symbols. Heartfield's most engaging works have the capacity to reveal reality behind abstract concepts through biting satire and sharp irony steeped in a truly subversive spirit. Heartfield's influence was widespread, reaching artist-designers throughout Europe.

The evolution of photomontage and other photographic forms on the printed page manifested the growing need to produce and transmit visual information, as well as to select, process, and transform images in order to construct meaning. This development, exemplified in "the new tempo of visual literature" that Moholy-Nagy identified with the typo-photo in 1925,¹²³ generated the growth of media, starting with photography and the printed page. This development was prompted by the same motivations to transmit and process information that propel contemporary communication technologies.

¹²² My translation: "John Heartfield est un de ces hommes qui ont douté le plus gravement de la peinture, des moyens techniques de la peinture. Un de ces hommes qui avaient pris conscience, au début du xx^e siècle, du caractère éphémère dans l'histoire même de la peinture, de cette peinture à l'huile qui n'a que quelques siècles d'existence, et qui nous paraît être *toute* la peinture, et qui peut d'un instant à l'autre abdiquer devant une technique nouvelle, et plus conforme à la vie nouvelle, à l'humanité d'aujourd'hui. On sait que le cubisme, notamment, a été une réaction des peintres devant l'invention de la photographie. La photo, le cinéma, rendaient pour eux puéril de lutter de *ressemblance*. Ils puisaient dans ces nouvelles acquisitions mécaniques une idée de l'art qui allait pour les uns à l'encontre du naturalisme, pour les autres à une redéfinition de la réalité. On a vu cela aboutir à la décoration chez Léger, à l'abstraction chez Mondrian, à l'organisation de soirées mondaines sur la Riviera pour Picabia.

Mais vers la fin de la guerre en Allemagne, plusieurs hommes (Grosz, Heartfield, Ernst), dans un esprit bien différent des cubistes collant un journal ou une boîte d'allumettes au cœur du tableau, histoire de reprendre pied dans la réalité, plusieurs hommes étaient amenés, dans leur critique de la peinture, à employer cette photographie de son sens d'imitation pour un usage d'expression [...]

John Heartfield *sait aujourd'hui saluer la beauté*. Il sait créer ces images qui sont la beauté même de notre temps, parce qu'elles sont le cri même des masses, la traduction de la lutte des masses contre le bourreau brun à la trachée de pièces de cent sous. Il sait créer ces images réelles de notre vie et de notre lutte, poignantes et prenantes pour des millions d'homme, et qui sont une part de cette vie et de cette lutte. Son art est un art suivant Lénine, parce qu'il est une arme dans la lutte révolutionnaire du prolétariat. John Heartfield *sait aujourd'hui saluer la beauté*. Parce qu'il parle pour l'énorme foule des opprimés du monde entier, et cela sans abaisser un instant le ton de sa magnifique voix, sans humilier la poésie majestueuse de son imagination colossale. *Sans diminution de la qualité de son travail*. Maître d'une technique qu'il a pleinement inventée, jamais bridé dans l'expression de sa pensée, avec pour palette tous les aspects du monde réel, brassant à son gré les apparences, il n'a d'autre guide que la dialectique matérialiste, que la réalité du mouvement historique, qu'il traduit en blanc et noir avec la rage du combat." Louis Aragon, *Les Collages* (Hermann: Paris, 1980); pp 82-88.

¹²³ Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* (Munich: Albert Langen, 1927); pp 36-38.

CHAPTER TWO: Towards Constructivism – From Photomontage to the Functionalist Dream

Fostered by the political success of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the utopian character of the avant-garde peaked in Constructivism, a movement closely identified with Communist ideology. By 1919, two figures, who would later come to dominate Soviet film were allied to avant-garde tendencies: Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein. As we shall see later, both artists assumed that filmic meaning is borne out of an assemblage of shots which creates a new synthesis – an overall meaning that lies not within each part but in the very fact of juxtaposition. Constructivist art investigated the dialectic of montage aesthetics: ranging from a meditative contemplation of reification to a powerful propaganda tool for mass agitation. As was discussed in the previous chapter, this historical opposition is exemplified by the intuitive work of Raoul Hausmann and the political work of John Heartfield. Whether one is talking of a rich composition or an elliptical composition, a seamless image¹ or an image exhibiting its support, such confrontations of heterogeneous spaces all emerged from montage; the “structural model” operating during the twentieth century and characteristic of all modes of expression.²

The proponents of Constructivism, artists Vladimir Tatlin, Alexander Rodchenko, Aleksei Gan, and the critic Osip Brik, sought to eliminate not only easel painting but the category of art itself, in order to replace it with utilitarian products. They envisioned a new role for the artist and saw themselves as engineers, designers and organisers participating in industrial production in support of the Communist revolution. For this reason, some adherents used the word *Productivism* as an alternative to the term Constructivism.³ Many of these artists, including El Lissitzky and Alexander Rodchenko, used photography, design and typography – media based on mechanical reproduction – as vehicles to advance revolutionary ideals. In their view, photography and film, together with the printed page, would replace traditional forms of painting and sculpture.

This new avant-garde advanced a collectivist vision of a classless society based on social utopianism, with the machine as the symbol of industrial development. The contention of this chapter is to place such artistic endeavours into the wider context of the practices undertaken throughout Europe at the time, in the domain of page design and photomontage. Through the strategy of montage, these practices charted the way for methods of confiscation, superimposition and fragmentation in modern art.

¹ This type of seamless montage was achieved by blocking-out an image where its background had been completely painted out before being printed on a negative.

² Jean Clay, *De l'impressionnisme à l'art moderne* (Paris: Hachette-Réalités, 1975); p. 234.

³ See Richard Andrews and Milena Kalinovska (eds), *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932* (Henry Art: Seattle; Rizzoli: New York, 1990); and Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (Yale University Press: New Haven, Connecticut, and London, 1987).

The avant-garde saw machine-made images in cinema and photography as symbols of revolution and progress in art that corresponded with the Communist vision. Constructivists drew a parallel between art and social revolution, between the rise of the proletariat as a new social class and new technologies for a new society. In Constructivism, the idea of progress was omnipresent; the arrow of time, the movement's favourite sign, represents history as a linear progression.

Constructivist Ideology and its Historical Interpretations

In 1923, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, then at the Bauhaus, wrote to Alexander Rodchenko about Constructivism: "this word has had a dazzling career, but few people know its meaning".⁴ Although critical thought and art historical works focussing on Constructivism have proliferated over the past twenty years, the complexity of this phenomenon has nonetheless not been exhausted, in particular when considered in relation with the vast array of its polygraphic activities. Indeed, today is in fact not much different from 1923. In the western world, Constructivist production and ideology continue to be interpreted in vastly contradictory terms: formalism or utilitarianism, return to order or revolutionary practice, ideology of rationality or embrace of the irrational, classicism or modernism. This confusion is worsened by the fact that each of these definitions can be justified by their authors in all good faith, as they liberally quote one or several texts taken from the literary theory or criticism of the time. An investigation of Constructivist photomontage cannot thus be undertaken unless an indication of which vital lead – among the numerous readings of works and Constructivist literature available – will be followed in the labyrinth of declarations and artistic practices of the 1920s avant-garde. The present approach will try to define the criteria which will serve as reference point, while avoiding the pitfall of cataloguing the multiple interpretations of Constructivism.

The term "Constructivism" is often used to label any abstract geometrical composition "calling on the spirit of rigorous forms".⁵ This, together with the epithet "Constructivist", can qualify the works of Vladimir Tatlin as well as those of Naum Gabo or Nicolas Schöffer, the works of Kasimir Malevich or Rodchenko and those of Theo van Doesburg, Joseph Albers or Sol Le Witt. Essentially founded on Gabo's statements⁶ published from the 1920s onwards, a

⁴ Letter published in the Polish journal *Fotografia*, No 11, 1970; and quoted in Szymon Bojko, *New Graphic Design in Revolutionary Russia* (Lund Humphries: London, 1972); p.23.

⁵ "se réclamant des formes rigoureuses". Otto Hahn, "Questions de terminologie", *Aspects historiques du constructivisme et de l'art concret* (Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris: Paris, 1977).

⁶ Gabo wrote and issued jointly with Antoine Pevsner in August 1920 a "Realistic Manifesto" proclaiming the tenets of pure Constructivism - the first time that the term was used. In the manifesto Gabo criticised Cubism and Futurism as not becoming fully abstract arts and stated that the spiritual experience was the root of artistic production. Gabo and Pevsner promoted the manifesto by staging an

relation can be established between Russian Constructivism and all forms of modern geometric and constructive art. It is thus easy to trace the American Minimalists of the 1960s right back to the Russian Constructivists (and Suprematists⁷). The view that privileges the link between the Constructivists and Minimalists, far from being candid, aims to collapse in an allegedly homogeneous form both timeless and apolitical values. In other words, it thus allows for the negation of the specificity of Russian or Soviet Constructivism and its social and political backdrop, conveniently neglecting such declarations as those made by Mayakovsky when confronted to western art in 1923:

For the first time a new word in the field of art – Constructivism – has emerged from Russia and not from France; it is even surprising to find this word in the French vocabulary. Not the Constructivism of artists who make useless construction out of metal sheets or wires ... but the Constructivism which only conceives formal work as engineering destined to shape our practical life.⁸

Mayakovsky was right in that Constructivism cannot be fully understood if one ignores its political intents, after all it was producing art to educate the masses about the Socialist ideal. Nonetheless there remain certain flaws in Mayakovsky's definition whereby works are seen as a repertoire of forms and not as a system of signs. A reminder that Constructivism is not necessarily linked to geometric abstraction can be found in the return to the photomontage, which emerged in the USSR with Constructivism. Herein lies another contradiction representative of Constructivist artists' writings, the movement was first defined by Osip Brik as stemming from abstract art when he presented the work of Rodchenko in 1923 in *LEF*: "Rodchenko is an abstract artist. He has become a Constructivist and a Productivist".⁹

In contradiction with Mayakovsky's reading, which depicts Constructivism as shaping "our practical life", another interpretation describes it as social and political ideology. Characterised by the refusal of aesthetic values, individualism and subjectivity, this art devoted to the cult of the machine, work and rationality would have as sole goal the establishment between the artist, the work and the public of a type of relation common to the

exhibition on a bandstand on Tverskoy Boulevard in Moscow and posted the manifesto on hoardings around the city.

⁷ Suprematism is an art movement focused on fundamental geometric forms (squares and circles) which formed in Russia in 1913. When Kazimir Malevich originated Suprematism in 1915 he was an established painter having exhibited in the "Donkey's Tail" and the "Der Blaue Reiter" (The Blue Rider) exhibitions of 1912 with Cubo-Futurist works. In his book *The Non-Objective World*, Malevich described the inspiration which brought about the powerful image of the black square on a white ground: "I felt only night within me and it was then that I conceived the new art, which I called Suprematism". Malevich also ascribed the birth of Suprematism to the *Victory Over the Sun*, Aleksei Kruchenykh's Futurist opera production for which he designed the sets and costumes in 1913. One of the drawings for the backcloth shows a black square divided diagonally into a black and a white triangle. Malevich thus created a Suprematist "grammar" based on fundamental geometric forms; the square and the circle. In the *0.10 Exhibition* in 1915, Malevich exhibited his early experiments in Suprematist painting. The centrepiece of his show was the *Black Square on White*.

⁸ Vladimir Mayakovsky quoted in Italian in Vieri Quilici, *L'Architettura del costruttivismo* (Laterza: Bari, 1969); p.509.

⁹ Osip Brik, "To Production", *LEF*, No 1, 1923.

social or political sphere, belonging exclusively to science, economy or technology. Although this definition is closer than the public stance of the avant-garde artists of the 1920s, it does not take into consideration the aesthetic effects obtained unwillingly or purposefully by those artists; or the irrational or symbolic relations created by such means of expression or techniques as the photomontage, the photogram, the cinema, or the poster; and neither does it consider the playfulness of a number of Russian avant-garde art.

At the end of the 1960s, Anatole Kopp was among the first to express the idea that Constructivism – in architecture at least – “was not limited to a quest for forms inspired by the aesthetic of the machine”, and that the entire artistic practices of the avant-garde rested upon the ideology of a construction of a new way of life.¹⁰ The editorials of *LEF* and *Novy LEF* confirm that this was a recurring theme in the discourse of those who called themselves the “Bolsheviks of art”. In the first issue of the review, the group while presenting its programme concluded: “*LEF* will fight for an art edification of life”. In this issue, a warning was sent out to all artists: “Constructivism of art alone equals zero ... Constructivism must become the highest formal research department of all life”. In May 1923, the editorial entitled “Comrades Organisers of New Life” declared: “The way of life is our new front; art is our weapon on this front”. And in its first 1927 issue, *Novy LEF* reiterated: “*LEF* knows not the flattery of the ear or eye and it replaces art to present life through the construction work of life”. As early as 1922, El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg set the tone by declaring in the Berlin review *Veshch, Objet, Gegestand*: “The objective is for constructive art which does not beautify life but organises it”.

The Ideology of Creativity

Following Anatole Kopp, art historians recognised the importance of the concept of “construction of the way of life” within Constructivist ideology. Peter Bürger, in his 1974 book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, points out that the task of the avant-garde artist is to shock the recipient, who is used to organic, or formalist works of art, in the hope that “such withdrawal of meaning will direct the reader's attention to the fact that the conduct of one's life is questionable and that it is necessary to change it”;¹¹ he later points out that “Paradoxically, the avant-gardist intention to destroy art as an institution is thus realized in the work of art itself. The intention to revolutionize life by returning art to its praxis turns into a revolutionizing of art”,¹² where “The recipient's attention no longer turns to a meaning of the work that might be grasped by a reading of its constituent elements, but to the principle of

¹⁰ Anatole Kopp, *Ville et révolution* (Editions Anthropos: Paris, 1967); p.127; and *Changer la vie, changer la ville* (U.G.E.: Paris, 1975).

¹¹ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1984), p.80.

¹² *Ibidem*, p.72.

construction”.¹³ Nonetheless, the debate remains open as to the values of order and rationality conveyed by the words “Constructivism” and “construction”, since the label Constructivism has been given to remarkably deconstructed works from the point of view of the most common norms of construction – photomontages and typographies epitomise this.

For the partisans of an exclusively formalist interpretation, the concept of construction implied by the term Constructivism would be a metaphorical evocation of how a work of art is structured.¹⁴ In fact, research on the laws of construction and the actual concept of construction dates back to the 1910s. As early as 1912, in a report produced by Alexandra Exter on French painting, the notion of compositional construction opposes to the “contemplative passivity” of the Cubists “the acting dynamic construction” of the Russian Futurists.¹⁵ In a 1923 book entitled “Towards a Theory of Painting”,¹⁶ Nikolai Tarabukin describes construction as the organisational principal of the materials of painting which rest on the internal logic inherent to a work of art.¹⁷ It is clear that these definitions of the pre-Constructivist era already associate the term construction with a concept suited to the everyday experience of the modern age. If order and rationality are indeed present in the works of this period, it clearly is the order and rationality of art. It is also true that the opposition of construction and composition formulated in the 1910s inaugurates the dynamic theory of the work of art¹⁸ which shall culminate during the Constructivist period.

Construction is not Constructivism. If it were only the metaphorical representation of the work of art that was in question, then why would a number of artists who had long been practising construction in their works only be called Constructivists after 1920? Why would Alexeï Gan, in his book *Constructivism*, uphold that prior to 1920 “leftist art had not cut the umbilical cord which attached it to the traditional art of the Old Faithfuls”¹⁹ – and this despite the fact that he was himself already using the principles of fracture and construction implied by the precept Constructivism. Why would Gan conclude his diatribe by this peremptory statement: “Constructivism was the obstetrician”, if he was not convinced that construction alone was not a sufficient practice for producing a Constructivist art work? Tatlin himself

¹³ Ibidem, p.81.

¹⁴ Stephen Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1974); p. xxvii

¹⁵ Andreï Nakov, *Alexandra Exter* (Galerie Jean Chauvelin: Paris, 1972); pp 16, 38-41.

¹⁶ Its actual date of conception would be 1916 according to the publishing committee.

¹⁷ Andreï Nakov (ed.), *Le Dernier Tableau, écrits sur l'art et l'histoire de l'art à l'époque du constructivisme russe* (Edition Champ Libre: Paris, 1972); pp 124-125.

¹⁸ This dynamic conception of art is aptly exemplified by Nam Gabo's and Anton Pevsner's 1920 text “The Realistic Manifesto”, in which they list the five tenets upon which their work and constructive technique rest. Here is the fifth principle: “We renounce the thousand-year-old delusion in art that held the static rhythms as the only elements of the plastic and pictorial arts.

We affirm in these arts a new element the kinetic rhythms as the basic forms of our perception of real time.” In: Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1996); p. 299.

¹⁹ “l'art de gauche n'avait pas tranché le cordon ombilical qui le reliait encore à l'art traditionnel des Vieux Croyants”. In: Gérard Conio, *Le Constructivisme russe* (L'Age d'homme: Lausanne, 1987).

disavowed his reliefs and counter-reliefs in 1920 – to which the concept of construction in sculpture had been applied for the first time in Russia – because he criticised the fact that they were “purely artistic” forms; while he justified the creation of utilitarian models such as the *Monument to the Third International* – the first ever proposition for a Constructivist architecture – with ideological arguments related to the construction of life. Tatlin believed that artistic and utilitarian aims could be unified to produce “models which stimulate inventions in the business of creating a new world and summon producers to take control over the forms of the new everyday life.”²⁰ This statement reveals that Tatlin welcomed the redefinition of the artist’s role where the spirit of egalitarianism art might now belong to all.

The term Constructivism does not further consecrate the technological and mechanical orientation followed by a part of the avant-garde from 1919 onwards. All those artists claiming themselves to be Constructivists do not all adhere without reserve to the idea that, through its structure, the work of art is in formal homology with industrial construction. If some artists entitle their paintings or sculptures constructions, they do not all rally round the ideology of the artist-engineer. To close the debate on “Composition or Construction” that took place at INKhUK in winter 1920-1921, Rodchenko declared composition anachronistic because it was related to aesthetics and concepts of taste. He defined construction as a new art form that arose from technology and engineering and was based on principles of rational organisation.²¹

All these accounts lead us to think that the Constructivist project is to create, through the production of objects, new vital situations for the citizens of the post-revolutionary society rather than adhere exclusively to the mechanical logic of industrial production. Although it is true that Constructivism remains faithful to the modern concept of dynamic construction of the work of art, it is preferable to associate it to the ideology of the “construction of the way of life”, itself influenced by the repercussion of the new political slogan “constructing socialism” – although the Russian language uses two distinct terms to designate these different concepts.²²

The Constructivists placed creativity at the centre of their ideology because, in opposition to creation, it can be found in everyday life and has something to do with the construction of life – since it is inherent to the fact of living itself.²³ By encouraging a creative mode of perception, Constructivists attempted to place the spectator in a situation of active participation which prepared him to live his social and personal life creatively. With the

²⁰ Christina Lodder, op.cit.; p.65.

²¹ For a thorough discussion of the debates on composition and construction within INKhUK, see Selim Khan Magomedov, *Alexandre Rodtchenko* (Philippe Sers: Paris, 1986); pp 83-89, and Christina Lodder, op.cit.; pp.83-94.

²² See Claude Leclanche-Boulé, *Typographies et photomontages constructivistes en URSS* (Papyrus: Paris, 1984); p.141.

²³ Donald Winnicott, *Jeu et réalité, l'espace potentiel* (Gallimard: Paris, 1975); p.95.

transfer of the procedures of art to the whole of daily life and with the creative approach to cultural phenomena, the Constructivists believed that the necessary conditions are present for the evolution of mentalities and the construction of a new way of life.

The concept of creativity also played a part in the description of the mode of reception of the work of art. The artistic procedures are often envisaged in their rapport with the creativity of the spectator/viewer and Lissitzky went as far as to confound into a single entity the spheres of culture, creativity and games in the comments he made about his 1922 book *About Two Squares*: his intention was to “make children play actively”. Did he not also write as early as 1920: “We are all creators?”²⁴

Within this scope, invention and creativity supplant order and rationality. The creativity of scientists and technicians often served as a reference point when it came to describing artistic processes. Tatlin was not alone in making “utilitarian models” responsible for stimulating invention in the modes of artistic creation. Varvara Stepanova stated that it was the transfer of the spirit of invention and modes of thinking of scientific and technological research to artistic creation which accounted for the difference between traditional composition and modern construction.²⁵ Rodchenko, despite a strong penchant for rationality, insisted on the importance of invention in the field of industrial aesthetics: “A proposition full of invention and not only a project. This is what is expected of a designer”.²⁶ Lissitzky stated in 1920 that the role of the artist is to enable the reconstruction of life by following his creative flair freely, by exceeding the limits of the work of art and by embracing all of life’s phenomena,²⁷ thereby revealing that the true stakes of the ideology of the construction of life are the transfer of creative and artistic behaviours found in contemporary art production onto everyday life. In 1928, Nikolai Aseev supported this thesis by assigning to each member of *LEF* the task of extending the frontiers of art to all human activities.²⁸

The Constructivist Space

The combinative space of the photomontage, inasmuch as it depicts material form, is a figurative space²⁹ related to plastic art. Among the questions raised by twentieth-century art,

²⁴ In Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers (ed.), op.cit., p.49.

²⁵ Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863-1922* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1962); pp 250-251.

²⁶ Szymon Bojko, op.cit., p.19.

²⁷ “Der Suprematismus des Weltaufbaus” (1920) quoted in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers (ed.), *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (New York Graphic Society: Greenwich, Connecticut, 1968); p.327.

²⁸ This also ties in with Büger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, op.cit.: “Through the avant-garde movements, the historical succession of techniques and styles has been transformed into a simultaneity of the radically disparate. The consequence is that no movement in the arts today can legitimately claim to be historically more advanced as art than any other.” (p.63)

²⁹ Since the arrival of abstract art the term figurative has been used to refer to any form of modern art that retains strong references to the real world and particularly to the human figure. In a general sense the figurative also applies retrospectively to all art before abstract art. Modern figurative art can be

the most important one is that of figurative space. Thus, a hypothesis concerning Constructive photomontage cannot be formed unless one postulates on the spatial system it is governed by. A modern figurative space does not exist as such and since modernity is an aesthetic of rupture, a definition of such spatial relations can only be initiated through a comparison with the system that preceded it. A basic overview of the rules which have governed plastic space since the Renaissance is called for, before an investigation of the spatial system used in Constructivist photomontages can be initiated. The following section elaborates on how art broke its hold from depicting approximate representations of an image that is perceived by the eye on a flat surface, where the artist strove to imitate nature.

Western classical painting rests on the principle of *imitatio naturae*³⁰ as its fundamental aesthetic. This theory is based on the conviction that nature can be the only source of beauty and truth for art. In a system which poses mimesis of natural forms as the foundation of art, the main problem which the painter was confronted with was that of the correct representation of three-dimensional bodies on a two-dimensional plane. In 1435, Alberti provided an answer to this problem which both determined the artist's task for centuries to come and established "legitimate perspective" as the only method of reproducing the visible: "The painter's duty, he said, consists of circumscribing and painting, with lines and colours, any body which presents itself under any guise, from a certain distance and from a position determined by the central radius, so that any representation shall appear in relief and very similar to visible objects".³¹ Remaining faithful to this definition and selecting the experiences of the Renaissance most suited to reproducing within the painting's frame the illusion of space, the classical era applied to the representation of the external world, on a two-dimensional "plastic screen", a perspective scheme, both linear and coloured, in order to produce the illusion of reality.

Erwin Panofsky³² and Pierre Francastel have shown in their work that this classical space normed by perspective, whose coherence is solely founded on the fixed and monocular viewpoint of the observer, does not provide a better answer to art's constant need for

seen as distinct from modern realism in that figurative art uses modern idioms. In fact, modern figurative art is more or less identical with the general current of Expressionism that can be traced through the twentieth century and on.

³⁰ Both Plato and Aristotle saw in mimesis the representation of nature. Plato thought all creation was imitation, and so the gods' creation was an imitation of the truth and essence of nature, and an artist's re-presentation of this god-created reality was twice-removed representation, leading away from the Ideal. Aristotle considered it important that there be a certain distance between the work of art on the one hand and life on the other; we draw knowledge and consolation from tragedies only because they do not happen to us. Without this distance, tragedy could not give rise to catharsis.

³¹ "L'office du peintre, disait-il, consiste à circonscrire et à peindre, avec des lignes et des couleurs, tout corps qui se présente sous une superficie quelconque, à une certaine distance et suivant une position déterminée du rayon central, de sorte que tout ce qui sera représenté apparaisse comme en relief et très semblable aux objets visible". My translation from Leon Battista Alberti, *De la statue et de la peinture* (A. Levy: Paris, 1868); p. 173.

³² Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (MIT Press: London, 1991).

naturalist objectivity than any other theory. According to Francastel, plastic art materialises the human mind's attitude towards the universe at a given time and in a given civilisation, it "translates the general behaviours and the mathematical, physical and geographical conceptions of a given society".³³

In the twentieth century following the profound changes in the social, scientific, technical and philosophical spheres, the rupture posed by contemporary art focused primarily on the problem of plastic space. Pierre Francastel explains: "societies change their plastic space when they settle materially into particular geographical or scientific spaces".³⁴ At the end of the nineteenth century, illusionistic spatial perspective which had transformed the frame into a transparent screen superimposable on its model gave way to modern art which reflected on its very own means. Thus substituting cut-up structures and processes of animation for the plastic field which resulted in highlighting the materiality of the canvas, its structural components – colour, line, surface, texture, support – its internal logic and its pictorial code. In the Soviet Union, the critic and art historian Nikolai Tarabukin reviewed the issues pertaining to modern art and produced a definition in 1923 which is in direct opposition to that of Alberti: "The form of a work of art derives from two fundamental premises: the material or medium (colors, sounds, words) and the construction, through which the material is organized in a coherent whole, acquiring its artistic logic and its profound meaning. Consequently, the notion of form should be understood as the real structure of the work, its structural or compositional unity [...] The form of objects from the outside world often serves as a stimulus to artistic creation, but form in this sense [...] must be excluded from the number of real pictorial components of the work of art [...]"³⁵ This means that the primordial function of the painter no longer is to reproduce the visible, but to organise the painted space on the surface of a two-dimensional canvas or sheet of paper and in this way create the conditions of perception of plastic space: physical presence of the support, discontinuities, multi-directional orientation, rhythm and movement, etc.

The spatial procedures used by the Constructivists all operate rupture and caesura within figurative space, steering the image back to the sheet of paper – thus reinforcing the quality of its surface. They consist, on the one hand, of setting up an immediate enclosure of space through the construction of abundant structures, and on the other, of integrating into this space such devices as the "reserve in white", contrast of solid plates and contours,

³³ "... traduit les conduites générales et les conceptions mathématiques, physiques et géographiques d'une société". My translation from Pierre Francastel, *Peinture et société* (Denöel/Gonthier: Paris, 1977); p. 134.

³⁴ "... les sociétés changent d'espaces plastiques tout de même qu'elles s'établissent dans des espaces géographiques ou scientifiques particuliers" My translation, op.cit., p. 142.

³⁵ This translation was found in Margit Rowell, "Vladimir Tatlin : Form/Faktura", *October*, volume 7, Soviet Revolutionary Culture (Winter 1978); pp 83-108, p. 104. The original text was published in French in Nikolai Tarabukin, *Le dernier tableau* (Champ Libre: Paris, 1972); p. 104.

superimposition and transparency, and elements of depth which allow the gaze to circulate without creating a coherent depth as such. Finally, they mark out, through the use of cuts, a geometric network which divides space up into sections and directs it according to predetermined structures pertaining to plasticity. Such procedures were also generally those applied to photomontage.

Generally, the result of these formal procedures founded on juxtaposition or superimposition is to produce morsels of representative space and create a multiple locus capable of embracing letter and image articulated by planes of geometric division and montage structures. This discontinuous, simultaneous and heterogeneous space, which the spectator's eye sets into dynamic motion, is a total departure from the classical tradition of coherent and orderly space based on a single vanishing point providing the axis of the image. For the Constructivists, the sheet of paper has become the multiple locus of various actions where the principles of rationality attributed to the work of art in classical production are overturned.

New Spatial Procedures: The Frontalisation of Space in Photomontage

In Russia, as in Western Europe, the modern concept of figurative space emerged at the turn of the century. Many artists of the Russian avant-garde recognised the founding role played by the painter Mikhail Vrubel, who was close to the symbolist group *Mir Iskousstova* (The World of Art) – a role similar to that played by Cézanne in contemporary western painting. Naum Gabo insisted that Vrubel's genius had formed the visual conscience of his generation and highlighted the upheaval of his fellow painters' visual habits once they had been in contact with Vrubel's work:

His genius is responsible for molding the visual consciousness of our generation, which came after him [...] Vrubel freed the arts of painting and sculpture from the academic schemata. He revived the concept in visual art that the fundamental visual elements are of decisive importance in the creation of a pictorial or plastic image; and, in that respect, his influence on our visual consciousness was as decisive as Cézanne's [...] Even Cubism was not entirely a surprise to us.³⁶

It must be added that there are no Russian artists who have not owed up, at one time or another, their indebtedness to Vrubel.³⁷

Mainstream critics of the beginning of the twentieth century valued Vrubel's work for its "spirituality",³⁸ whereas for young artists trying to break away from the shackles of the Academy his influence bore more on the tabular character of his work. He was a great admirer of Byzantine frescos and mosaics which he had studied close up, and he defined the

³⁶ Naum Gabo, *Of Divers Arts* (Faber and Faber: London: 1962); p.153.

³⁷ See John Bowl, "Rodchenko and Chaikov", in: *Art and Artists*, volume 11, number 7, October 1976, (London); pp 28-33.

³⁸ See Valentine Marcade, *Le Renouveau de l'art pictural russe 1863-1914* (L'Age d'Homme: Lausanne, 1971); pp 92-94.

originality of their spatial structures as a decorative art concept which was anti-naturalist and anti-perspectival: “Byzantine painting differs fundamentally from three-dimensional art. Its whole essence lies in the ornamental arrangement of form which emphasizes the flatness of the wall”.³⁹ Vrubel’s works were in line with other Modernist experiments of the period in that he wanted to demonstrate the process of “making” art. This is what Viktor Schlovsky calls “bearing a device”: “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged”.⁴⁰

One of his most modern paintings is entitled *Lilacs* (1900). It is as radical in a way as Monet’s *Nymphéas*, but on a reduced scale, Vrubel has respected the flatness of the canvas and has treated each part of the painted surface with equal interest. He has produced an “all-over” painting before its time in which the whole surface of the canvas has been deprived of an optical centre and vibrates through the repetition of rectangular blocks of colour of varying dimension and orientation.⁴¹ By straightening space on the canvas and by pummelling colour, he has uncovered the material components of his painting while necessarily departing from traditional external meaning usually associated with the medium – hence paving the way for the radical experiments of Suprematism and Non-Objectivism. By renouncing Unitarian and hierarchical classical space, Vrubel created a space where detail cancels the principle of the fixed viewpoint, resists the focalisation of the gaze on an imaginary single vanishing point and calls for a “sweeping”⁴² exploration – in other words, the recognition of the material surface of the painting.

This section will attempt to shed light on the particular techniques developed by the Constructivists according to the time-scale in which they emerged. During the 1920s, when the object reappeared in figurative space, following Suprematism and Non-Objectivism⁴³, the

³⁹ Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1986); p.32.

⁴⁰ Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004); pp 15-21, p.16.

⁴¹ This technique can be linked to what Gilles Deleuze calls *haptic* vision in “Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation” (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2005). The tactile-optical space of representation presents a complex eye-hand relation: an ideal optical space that nonetheless maintains virtual referents to tactility (depth, contour, relief). From this, two types of subordination can occur: a subordination of the hand to the eye in *optical* space (Byzantine art), and a strict subordination of the eye to the hand in a *manual* space (Gothic art). But what Deleuze, following Riegl, terms *haptic* space (from the Greek to touch) is a space in which there is no longer a hand-eye subordination in either direction. It implies a type of seeing distinct from the optical, a close-up viewing where “the sense of sight behaves just like the sense of touch”. Deleuze suggests that the juxtaposition of pure tones arranged gradually on the flat surface produces a properly *haptic* space, and implies a properly *haptic* function of the eye (the planar character of the surface creates volumes only through the different colours that are arranged on it).

⁴² The concepts of sweeping and focalisation are borrowed from Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination* (Weidenfeld: London, 1993).

⁴³ Throughout 20th century art historical discourse, critics and artists working within the reductive or pure strains of abstraction have often suggested that geometric abstraction represents the height of a

composite images of photomontage rekindled with a detailed space. This was posited in opposition to the coherence of depth, which the introduction of photography into the figurative space resuscitated, since the photographic image can only perpetuate Alberti's monocular vision of classical art.

The photomontages which mostly correspond to this project are constructed from blocked-out photographs which enable the introduction of objects and characters with their own space within the composition. The gaze, attracted by a multitude of objects in a multitude of non-unified spaces, is thus constrained to run erratically across the figurative field in order to explore every detail - Paul Klee wanted the eye of the spectator "to graze" the surface of the work of art, before finding the path the artists had arranged for him.⁴⁴

Alexander Rodchenko used the same process in 1923 to construct most of the photomontages illustrating Mayakovsky's poem *Pro Eto*, in which the poet lamented over the adverse effects bourgeois life had on his passion for Lily Brik and the Revolution. One of Rodchenko's photomontages is entitled *Another cup of tea* (Fig. 36) because of the inscription glued on the lower part of the image and the photographic fragments opposing fraternal relations between two soldiers in the red Army drinking tea, the bourgeois tea ritual with samovar and other silverware of the former regime, and the ceremony of allegiance to tsarist power in a primitive society governed by class struggles. In this image made up of heterogeneous elements (decoupage from sales catalogues, news reports and identity photographs), the process of montage shatters space thus dispensing with the perceptive centre and focal point. It eliminates the logical relation of perspective which provides coherence to the traditional image. It also disrupts the rules of lighting and substitutes the modulation of colour through light by a planimetric frame of blacks, whites and greys placed in alternation, hence highlighting the frontality of the image. In the apparent chaos of this composition, the orientation of certain objects within the figurative field provides a specific dynamic. The order of the spatial disposition of these objects is not intended to provide a type of reading from which meaning will emerge; rather the message is delivered through the first viewing of this conflicted universe. It is only a means to exploring its extended field of

Non-Objective art practice, which necessarily stresses or calls attention to the root plasticity and two-dimensionality of painting as an artistic medium. Thus, it has been suggested that geometric abstraction might function as a solution to problems concerning the need for modernist painting to reject the illusionistic practices of the past while addressing the inherently two-dimensional nature of the picture plane as well as the canvas functioning as its support. Wassily Kandinsky, one of the forerunners of pure Non-Objective painting, was among the first modern artists to explore this geometric approach in his abstract work.

⁴⁴ "The limitation of the eye is its inability to see even a small surface equally sharp at all points. The eye must "graze" over the surface, grasping sharply portion after portion, to convey them to the brain which collects and stores the impressions" Paul Klee, *Pedagogical sketchbook* (Faber and Faber: London, 1977); p.33.



Fig. 36 *Another Cup of Tea*, Alexander Rodchenko, 1923



Fig. 37 *The Crisis*, Alexander Rodchenko, 1923

representation: after having sustained Mayakovsky's gaze in the top left-hand corner, the viewer will follow the direction of the crossed spoons to stumble over the limits of the frame in the top right-hand corner and follow the frame vertically to the character with the monocle. The spectator's gaze will then wander horizontally to the people bowing before their suzerain and go back up vertically to the left, after having encountered a giant samovar, to follow the aggressiveness of the knife standing upright and return to Mayakovsky's image and to the "theme" of his poem. A recurring theme present in the first few verses of the poem: "The knife of my voice cuts me through my paws".⁴⁵

In this type of photomontage, the prolific occupation of the surface by photo segments always has as effect frontality and flatness. This same process can be found in Rodchenko's other illustrations of *Pro Eto* and in other works such as Liubov Popova's poster for Meyerhold's production of Tretiakov's play *Earth In Turmoil* in 1923. This "all over" treatment of the surface was more frequently used at the beginning of the 1920s and this may be due to the fact that, as Eisenstein says about his early films, the emphasis on the principle of montage is a characteristic of the early phases of these new genres.⁴⁶ As discussed below, this style is nonetheless directly put in competition with the process known as reserve in white⁴⁷ which flourished in the 1930s and allowed higher control over the viewer's imagination.

As a principle the use of the reserve is in complete opposition to the use of the "all over" technique but is just as effective in image overload as a means of exploiting the flat surface of the canvas. The reserve in white appears to be particularly used as the absolute weapon against the perspectival burrowing of photomontages constructed from blocked-out photographs. This can be seen in two of Rodchenko's photomontages, *The Crisis* (Fig. 37) and *Self-portrait*. In both works, the reserve in white recalls the materiality of the support to those who thought that the perspectival or compositional scheme had not undergone radical change.

In 1922, in one of the first photomontages showing Tatlin at work, Lissitzky left certain parts of the drawn elements in the montage devoid of colour and blocked out the photograph he inserted in the work. Gustav Klucis, who generally preferred to keep a degree of coherence in the spatial manipulations of his photographs, had frequent recourse to the reserve in white. It was thus that in a 1925 photomontage, destined to illustrate Mayakovsky's poem *V.I. Lenin*, the figure of Lenin is wholly detached on a white surface without any ground level or other

⁴⁵ Vladimir Mayakovsky, *That's What*, translated by George Hyde and Larissa Gureyeva (Tadmorden: Arc Publications, 2008); pp 11 .

⁴⁶ Quoted by Viatcheslav Ivanov, "Eisenstein et la linguistique structurale moderne", in: *Cahiers du cinéma*, number 220-221, May-June 1970 (Paris); p. 48.

⁴⁷ An element or text is routed out in white over a black, coloured or photographed background.



Fig. 38 Front Cover for Mayakovsky's *Pro Eto*, Alexander Rodchenko, 1923



Fig. 39 Front Cover of *Syphilis*, Alexander Rodchenko, 1926

indication of spatial structure. If it is true that such a blank space symbolically represents the cosmic space promised for the extension of Marxism-Leninism,⁴⁸ it also holds true that such a surface foremost represents a blank sheet of paper which shows the figure of Lenin as well as scriptural signs made up of letters through which one uncovers the support. In a 1924 photomontage, also published in memory of Lenin, Klucis adopted an intermediary technique which consisted of turning the centre of the image into an abundant and compact structure, and to detach the whole on a white background.

Rodchenko used this intermediary formula in 1923 to organise a photomontage which, together with *Crisis*, was used to illustrate the poem *Flight*. On this image, Trotsky, portrayed as the “guardian of the revolution”, is in the centre of the composition surrounded by planes and airships, by canons and soldiers which symbolise the entire Armed Forces. The photomontage here apparently remains in the service of a traditional conception of the image in a three-dimensional space where scale and perspective have been respected. The top left half of the image with airships, planes and a radio transmitting tower has been reserved in white, without substantially altering the viewer’s gaze since the horizon line is clearly defined. However, this line is broken even before it reaches the base of the tower, which forms the axis of the composition, and is totally absent from the left side where Trotsky’s silhouette emerges from a void. It can be observed that by reserving more than half of his photomontage surface in white, Rodchenko has created a contradictory space in which the scaling of the planes, the accelerated reduction of the characters’ size, the shots in miniature and the presence of a horizon line provide us with no sense of depth. With the break in continuity and in spatial coherence echoed by the double recess of the lower limits of the composition, it is the support-plane of the image which unveils its materiality in order to sharpen the two-dimensional character of the figurative space.

The image which best represents frontalisation through the collage of one or more photographs on a neutral background is the extraordinary photomontage by Rodchenko showing a photograph of Lily Brik which was made for the front cover of *Pro Eto* (Fig. 38). The absolute frontality of the shot coupled with the flattening effect of the spatial disposition

⁴⁸ For a discussion of the representation of cosmic space in relation to Marxism see Florens Christian Rang, *Deutsche Bauhütte. Ein Wort an uns Deutsche über mögliche Gerechtigkeit gegen Belgien und Frankreich und zur Philosophie der Politik* (Gemeinschaftsverlag Eberhard Arnold: Sannerz, Leipzig, 1924); p. 133. On the background to the text’s genesis, see Lorenz Jäger, *Messianische Kritik: Studien zu Leben und Werk von Florens Christian Rang* (Böhlau: Köln, Weimar, Wien, 1998); pp46-50. For Rang, technology opens up a “realm of *Geistlichkeit*” in which manual and intellectual labour will be united just as the political oppositions of idealism and materialism, capitalism and socialism are overcome within it. Rang’s sketch of the “world-hour of technology” follows the Marxian diagnosis of the contradiction between the level of technological productive forces and the capitalistic relations of production.



Fig. 40 Front Cover of *Business*, Alexander Rodchenko, 1929

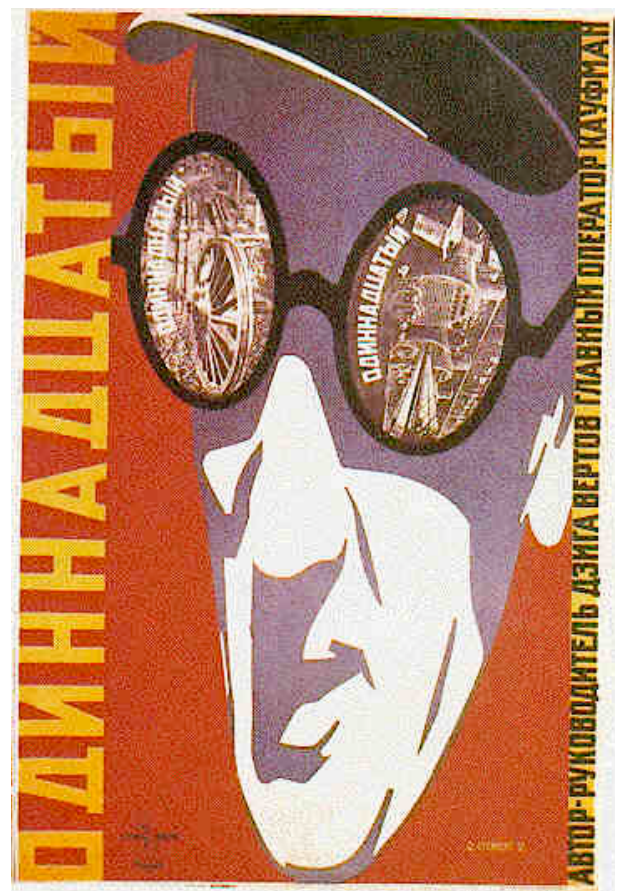


Fig. 41 Poster for *The Eleventh* by Dziga Vertov, Stenberg brothers, 1928

on a non-referential background likens this photomontage to the modern equivalent of the medieval icons said to be “acheiropoiete”⁴⁹ – that is, “not made by human hand”. The reserve not only affects the background of the image, but also some of the figures. In an illustration for *Pro Eto* which does not feature in the published book, Rodchenko proposes a completely novel formula since he adds, alongside many photographic elements, shapes which are not obtained through drawing or photography, but through the decoupage of white silhouetted objects which can be seen in the background of the photographic paper in the final print of the photomontage.

Rodchenko used this process at least twice with increasing complexity. In 1926, on the cover of *Syphilis*, a book of poetry brought back from the United States by Mayakovsky, he made a reserve in the shape of a circular stain on a negative print of a portrait (Fig. 39). Then in 1929 on the cover of *Business*, a collection of poems and articles from the Literary Constructivist Centre, he placed a reserve in the shape of glasses – which can also be seen as the number 29, the year this collection was published – on a photographic reproduction (Fig. 40). Inside this reserve, which controls the field of representation on the horizontal and diagonal axes, a red line redefines the outline of the glasses, or the numbers, and provides the ensemble with some depth by projecting the space which the reserve had for mission to flatten.

Rodchenko was not the only one to reserve blanks within figures; others, like the Stenberg brothers, had frequent recourse to this technique. The brothers also developed a projection system to manipulate the film stills from which they worked, allowing them to imitate the technique of photomontage with drawn images. In a poster for one of Dziga Vertov’s films, *The Eleventh* (Fig.41), unusually they used a montage of photographs instead of their photomontage by projection. Thus, they obtained the verticalisation of the image by combining various processes: the vertical inscription of the text, the excessive elongation of the face shown very close up, the ovalisation of the glasses on which are imposed photo-fragments, themselves containing vertical inscriptions, the application of colour by solid plate with big white reserves used for the treatment of the face.

Montage as Mosaic

In the USSR, the cinematographic research of Vertov, Kuleshov and Eisenstein has indisputably rooted the practice of montage as conveying meaning in the eyes of all avant-garde artists. It may not be by pure chance that Rodchenko started making photomontages for

⁴⁹ The New Testament recalls that the legendary figure of Veronica (i.e. “véra iconica” the genuine image) was among the crowd which followed Jesus and helped carry his cross. She took pity, approached Jesus and placed a cloth on his face which was covered in blood and sweat. The Christ’s features would have left a print on the fabric. This account inspired many works of art during medieval times. This type of iconography is known as “acheiropoiete”, which means not made by human hand.

Pro Eto at the same time as he worked with Dziga Vertov on the intertitles of the documentary series *Kino-Pravda*. But the Soviet photomonteurs were especially sensitive to the possibilities of spatialisation which opened up to them through the practice of montage. They were aware that cinematographic montage functions through juxtaposition in time, despite all the discontinuities it introduces; its mode thus remains linear and sequential, whereas photomontage juxtaposes plastic elements in space – place of discontinuity and simultaneity to use McLuhan's words, place of "divergence" to use Lissitzky's. They also applied themselves to preserving, within montage structures, the spatial aspect of works with two frontalised dimensions, in front of which the eye is not compelled to remain fixed but is rather led to explore the surface in a sweeping fashion.

Vrubel's painting *Lilacs* with its mosaic of coloured strokes, Rodchenko's *Another cup of tea* with Lenin's image detached from its support left bare, Lissitzky's or Popova's typogrammes, the covers of *LEF*, all provide examples of space characteristically structured by montage. To these spatial arrangements one could add Lissitzky's page layouts for magazines such as *Veshch* in 1922 or *Osnova* in 1926. In all these compositions it can be observed that montage has elided the perspectival centre or exploded linearity, it imposed a discontinuous reading to texts and images in rupture with the perspectival habits of traditional painting founded on the coherence of continuity.

In his article entitled *The Artist in Production*,⁵⁰ Lissitzky analyses the problems of modern typographic composition and discerns two different attitudes common to book producers. The first, which he called "the construction of the architectonic book", is an all-encompassing formula in which the artist conceived the entire book on the basis of a "reciprocal action of its different parts". The second, which he called "plastic montage", mainly used for the conception of book covers or posters, consists of using "the material of composition like the tiles of a mosaic".

The procedures of montage indeed lead to structuring space, a type of structure which can already be found in medieval painting, iconography and Byzantine evangeliaries, and which

⁵⁰ El Lissitzky, "The Artist in Production", *Catalogue of the Graphic Arts Section*, Polygraphic Exposition of the Union of Republics (Moscow, 1927). The same text, translated in French is also found in Claude Leclanche-Boulé, op.cit., p. 141. "Ce n'est qu'après la Révolution d'Octobre que quelques-uns parmi nos artistes, désireux de montrer ce qu'il y avait de nouveau dans chaque domaine en utilisant exclusivement des moyens en rapport avec ce domaine, se sont fixés pour tâche de créer le nouveau livre avec le matériau spécifique du livre, c'est-à-dire la composition typographique. Ce travail s'est fait dans deux directions : la première pourrait s'appeler « le livre architectonique », son principe fondamental est la construction de l'ensemble du livre aussi bien que de chaque page. Cette construction est basée sur les proportions et l'action réciproque des différentes parties, le rapport entre les parties imprimées et les surfaces vides, le contraste entre les types de différentes forces. Mais l'essentiel de cette approche réside dans l'usage exclusif du matériel typographique et des procédés spécifiques de l'imprimerie, comme par exemple l'impression en plusieurs couleurs. Dans la seconde direction qu'on pourrait appeler montage plastique, on utilise le matériel de composition comme des pierres d'une mosaïque pour le montage de couvertures, de pages isolées ou d'affiches."

the twentieth century rekindled with. In this respect we could use the term “mosaic structure” following on from Lissitzky in reference to Vrubel, the founder of modern Russian painting, and his sources of inspiration on the one hand; and to the fate of the term “mosaic” in the field of the media since Mallarmé spoke of “a mosaic of attitudes of the collective consciousness brought about by the popular press”.⁵¹ After him Marshall McLuhan, describing the mosaic as a “multidimensional world of interstructural resonance”,⁵² defined as mosaic the scholastic method set up by Thomas More “dealing with many aspects and levels of meaning in crisp simultaneity”⁵³ as well as his own description of the constellation of phenomena which make up the Gutenberg Galaxy.⁵⁴ He described printing as being mainly about the construction of a mosaic⁵⁵ and likened the newspaper to a mosaic of information; that is, a complex entity comprising of news items and events under the same title.⁵⁶ More recently, Abraham Moles called modern culture a mosaic culture, stemming from the media and characterised by non-logical and non-linear modes of acquisition;⁵⁷ and François Richaudeau proposed to define the complex layouts of modern typography as mosaic or abundant, harking back to the multidimensional manuscripts of the Middle Ages.⁵⁸ The term “mosaic”, when applied to the media, has thus taken on specific connotations which enable it to widen its field of application to the structure of montage as found in photomontage, the new means of communication of the 1920s.⁵⁹ An image formed of disparate elements: this definition perfectly suits photomontage whose every photo, text or coloured fragment only constitute a single brick of a larger edifice.

Geometric Cut and Montage

The visual logic which governs photomontage also produces other effects aside from the mosaic structure. Each time the artist introduces a geometric division within the figurative field it affects the whole of the work’s surface. The image, organised according to this geometric pattern, aims not to reproduce real-life space according to the geometric perspective of classical representation, but rather aims to reinforce the two-dimensional

⁵¹ My translation, quoted by François Richaudeau, “Vers une typographie foisonnante”, *Communication et langage*, Number 31 (Paris, 1976); pp 43-54: “...mosaïque d’attitudes du conscient collectif suscitée par la presse populaire”.

⁵² Marshall Mc Luhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1967); p. 43.

⁵³ Mc Luhan, op.cit., p. 129.

⁵⁴ Mc Luhan, op.cit., p. 4.

⁵⁵ Mc Luhan, op.cit., p. 132: “Authorship before print was in a large degree the building of a mosaic”.

⁵⁶ Marshall Mc Luhan, *Understanding Media* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1964); pp 226-227.

⁵⁷ Quoted by François Richaudeau, op. cit., p. 44.

⁵⁸ Richaudeau, op. cit., p. 54.

⁵⁹ It is understood that the technique of photomontage has been known since the end of the 19th century; it is seen as a playful activity more than a meaningful practice: in 1889, in the first issue of the Parisian magazine *Paris-Revue* an article on photomontage can be found entitled “Récréations photographiques” [Photographic Playtime].

character of the support. This geometric pattern can sometimes represent an axis of division, or can sometimes be arbitrary, non-representative borders between two planes of different colours. In some photomontages, arrows play the role of an oblique axis, such as those found in Lissitzky's 1925 poster project for a Munich exhibition, which should have brought together his works along with those of Man Ray and Piet Mondrian under the theme Paris-New-York-Moscow.

In one of Klucis's photomontages celebrating Lenin, an agitprop work which the artist called photo-slogan-montage, arrows point to the diagonal trajectories of the projectiles thrown at Lenin by the opposition and twisted to obey Lenin's revolutionary slogan: "Turn your arms on the bourgeoisie". Lenin's figure is the median of the diagonal and the whole composition is thus framed and tightened by the textual elements of the image found in the angles opposite the diagonal, similarly to a field of fire. It is rare to find this type of justification and near-figurative character given to geometric cut elsewhere than in the work of Klucis.

On the other hand, the mode of spatial organisation based on the diagonal can frequently be found in his works. He used it as early as 1919 for *The Dynamic City*, a work which holds certain historical value since in a 1931 article published in *Izofront*,⁶⁰ Klucis dubbed the work first Soviet photomontage. This work is not easily deciphered from the reproductions found: some photographic silhouette cut-outs can be made out against a Suprematist spatial composition⁶¹ – Suprematist compositions were produced according to a very strict "grammar" based on the fundamental geometric forms that are the square and the circle – to which photographic reproductions of architecture and materials of various textures have been added. In the same 1931 article, Klucis describes his experience of using photography as the technique and expressive means assembled according to the principle of multiple scales, thus upturning the secular canons of representation, perspective and proportion. These comments are seminal since, on the one hand, they date the first use of the photomontage as meaningful practice in the USSR around 1920 and, on the other, confirm that photomontage was used in Soviet Russia as a weapon against the illusionism of simple photographic representation – and not in order to introduce narration into figurative works, as has sometimes been stated.

⁶⁰ Gustav Klutsis, "Le Photomontage comme Nouvel Aspect de l'Art d'Agitation" (Photomontage as a New Kind of Art of Agitation, 1930–1931), in Claude Leclanche-Boulé, op.cit.; p. 145. Since translations from Russian can be variable, Klucis's comments concerning the *Dynamic City* must be taken with some caution.

⁶¹ A good example of Suprematist space would be Kazimir Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: White on White* from 1918. A white square floating weightlessly in a white field, it was one of the most radical paintings of its day: a geometric abstraction without reference to external reality. Yet the picture is not impersonal: we see the artist's hand in the texture of the paint, and in the subtle variations of the whites. The square is not exactly symmetrical, and its lines, imprecisely ruled, have a breathing quality, generating a feeling not of borders defining a shape but of a space without limits.

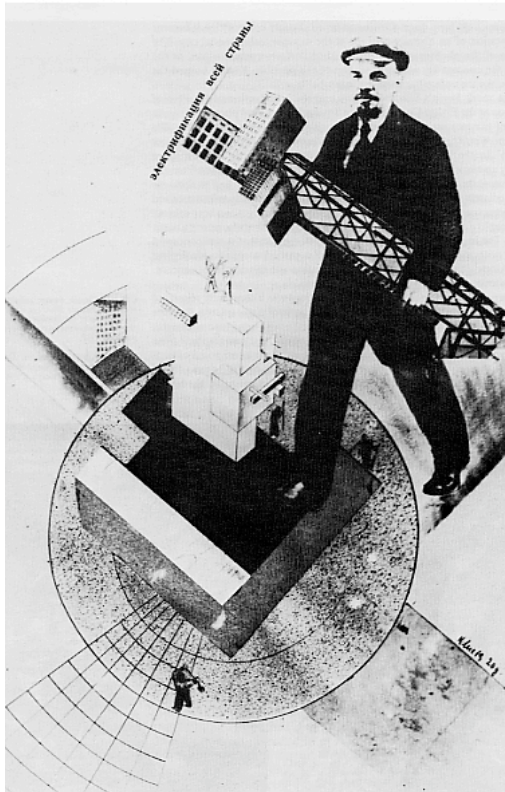


Fig. 42 Poster for Lenin's Electrification Campaign, Gistav Klucis, 1921



Fig. 44 Front Cover for Shaginian's *Mess Mend*, Alexander Rodchenko, 1924



Fig. 43 Poster for Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, Rodchenko, 1926

In 1921, Klucis turned this photomontage into a more openly Constructivist project for a poster, destined to support Lenin's electrification campaign (Fig. 42). He eliminated the "technical" effects of the original; installed an axonometric architectural view instead of strongly textured planes; enhanced the importance of the circular cut of the oblique axis, whose angle was thus modified; and glued a full-size photograph of Lenin holding an electricity pylon under his arm in a diagonal orientation over the whole composition. This photomontage underwent a final change in 1922 when Klucis turned it into a propaganda image praising sports in which a gyrating structure, superimposed over enormous geometric letters, combined the circular cut and the diagonal cut of the first two works in a more dynamic and coherent way.⁶²

Despite his attraction for orthogonal structures, Rodchenko did not shun away from treating the surfaces of his works with diagonals and indulged in the dynamic thrust they conferred on his images. He used them in 1923, materialised by the blades of a propeller in a project for an insignia for the airplane company *Dobrolet* – the artist associated them to two orthogonal structures and used them to divide the name of the firm up into two unequal fragments, while still retaining the linear characteristics of traditional writing. Still in 1923, the oblique of a telephone line over an urban view constitutes the main axis of a photomontage for *Pro Eto* which harks back to Lissitzky's warning to the reader in *About Two Squares*. Generally, Rodchenko avoided arbitrary layouts in his photomontages which he preferred to "assemble" using representations of objects and people; he took up this practice again in his works in straight photography, where we know the diagonal was the dominant vector.

A variation to the oblique cut, the chiasitic cut (or cross-shaped layout) implements a tighter layout of the surface – but is seldom used. Constructions laid out in the shape of a diagonal cross can be found in certain photographs used in some of Klucis's photomontages. On one of them illustrating Mayakovsky's poem *VI Lenin*, one can see an axonometric drawing with six branches – marked out in grids conveying the third dimension – made up of solid red square blocks of colour inserted between two branches of the three-dimensional figure. Photographs portraying the artist and his wife are placed on opposite diagonal axes and fitted between the two other branches. Other blocked-out photographs of varying scales, representing building workers, are also oriented according to a double oblique cut and laid out on the extremities of the cross' branches. All these elements are laid out according to diagonal law, apart from the textual element inserted on the lower part of the page which serves as foundation to this strange construction intended to symbolise the construction of socialism. On the much

⁶² Further reading on the transformation of Klucis's first photomontage, see Susan Compton, "Art + Photography", *The Print Collector's Newsletter*, Volume 7, Number 1, March-April 1976 (New York); pp. 12-15.

simpler poster created by Rodchenko in 1926 for Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin* (Fig. 43), the chiasmic cut formed by the canon batteries is doubled, according to the importance of the event and to the sought effect on the spectator.

In 1924, Rodchenko produced the covers for a ten-part American-style detective story entitled *Mess Mend*, written by Marietta Shaginian under the pseudonym Jim Dollar (Fig. 44). The double initials of the title clearly provided the general triangular layout for the top of the cover, while Rodchenko integrated two compositional techniques for the central part of the photomontage: a prismatic structure resembling a kaleidoscopic image with its intersected planes, and a flat mosaic structure from which triangle shapes appear. On the other hand, in the photomontage *Shower* intended for a children's book, Klucis imposed the triangular cut to all the image's elements – apart from the elements disposed in an arc at the top – and, notably to the young boy's posture photographed with his legs apart and arms folded behind his head. In another photomontage for the book *Lenin and Children*, Klucis placed on a diagonal arrow children who are walking, assembled from photographic segments and forming triangular structures.

The circular cut is as common in Constructivist photomontage as linear or triangular cuts, but it is rare for it to be the sole technique used for dividing up space. Indeed, it is generally associated to other systems of spatial division which give greater dynamics to the representation and provide axes of orientation to space – since the circle is by definition a non-oriented figure. When it is restricted to the curves and counter-curves of a spiral, however, its purpose is to orient the figurative field. The circular cut is the structure privileged by Rodchenko. In one of his first posters for *Battleship Potemkin*, the surfaces confined to two circles in the shape of portholes are organised in opposite direction. A white circular cut obstructs a negative photographic portrait on the cover of *Syphilis* (Fig. 39); and another can also be found in the photomontage *Another Cup of Tea*, filled with the black silhouettes of various characters (Fig. 36).

According to Andrei Nakov “the logic of rotation”, the basis of this “circular style”, which swept across Constructivist works in the 1920s “constitutes the alpha and the omega of the Constructivist system”.⁶³ The diversity of the geometric structures used to divide space calls for such a judgment to be defined; but it is true that the circle, the image symbolising immobility and eternity in classical art, is often turned into an active structure in Constructivist works – and particularly when the circle serves as a support for typography, since reading obliges the gaze to follow the circumference or the printed page to be turned. This is the case for the Stenberg brothers' film posters, which Nakov describes as being “in

⁶³ Andrei Nakov, *The Suprematist Straight Line. Malevich, Suetin, Chasnik, Lissitzky* (Annely Juda Fine Art: London, 1975); pp 4-39.



Fig. 45 Poster for Vertov's *Man With A Movie Camera*, Stenberg brothers, 1929

the direct lineage of dynamic Constructivism which sees the image as a visual driving force in rotation”.⁶⁴ One of these posters destined for Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (Fig. 45), unwinds a ribbon in a spiral sweeping the figure of a woman in a gyratory fashion. It offers an image of circles destabilised by typography.

Moving from the division of space according to geometric shapes, the next section will now discuss another system ruled by cutting effects which can be likened to the axis of division mentioned at the beginning of this section. Cutting space into slices or slithers, like other systems of divisions, hinders the gaze from escaping into the depth of the image. This technique has the advantage of controlling the entire surface through the systematic repetition of the same structure. A perfectly anti-illusionist division which destroys the image’s coherence and imposes a completely arbitrary linear and colourful disposition. This operation is mostly carried out vertically. On the cover of Ehrenburg’s book *Materialisation of the Fantastic*, the cutting effect is intensified by the alternation of positive and negative photographic fragments. The Stenberg brothers used this technique as a pretext for the cinematic demultiplication of the image in the poster for “The Trial for the Three Million”.

In a 1924 photo-slogan-montage, *Lenin at the frontier of two eras in the development of humanity*, Klucis divided his space into three parallel vertical planes evoking a ternary temporal division. Verticality is emphasized by arrows pointing upwards and downwards as symbols of the past and the future. As often is the case with Klucis, this plastic solution, contrary to traditional representations of horizontal and sequential temporality, is loaded with symbolic meaning since it provides a dynamic and visual equivalent to the rupture introduced by Lenin’s revolutionary action in historical continuity.

Montage as Plural Locus

The mosaic structuring and geometric cutting of figurative space mainly serve to assert the specifically tabular and plastic character of photomontage. The artists engaged in this revolutionary practice added complex procedures to these anti-illusionist and anti-naturalistic strategies designed to fragment the coherent space of representation which also contributed, albeit in a different way, to the substitution of classical space by plural spaces.

Superimposition, for instance, lead to the creation of new spatial structures founded, not on juxtaposition, but on transparency. Lissitzky and Rodchenko were the first Soviets to experiment with these new spatial forms in 1924. To achieve this, Lissitzky favoured the now well-know “sandwich” technique which consists of obtaining a positive print by printing different sandwiched negatives placed simultaneously in the slide changer of the enlarger;

⁶⁴ Andrei Nakov, *Stenberg* (Annely Juda Fine Art: London, 1975); p. 62.

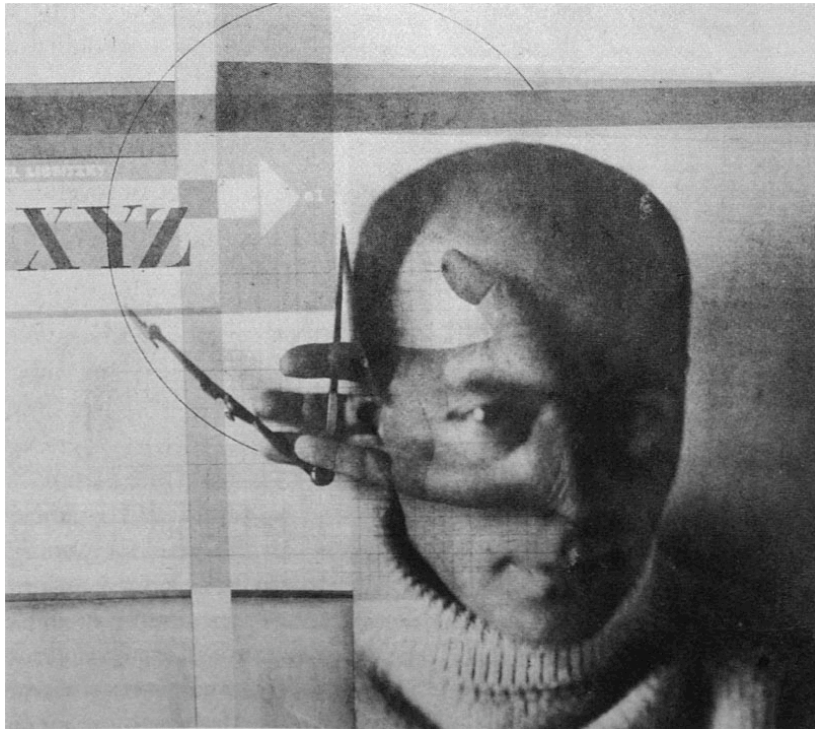


Fig. 46 *The Constructor*, El Lissitzky 1924



Fig. 47 *Arkhitektura VKhUTEMAS*, El Lissitzky 1927

while Rodchenko seemed to prefer multiple exposures to shots. Whatever the technique used the result is a fluid merging of composite, layered graphics with strong evocative overtones. They most probably did not invent this technique since superimposition was already being used in cinema – of which stunning examples can be found in Eisenstein's 1924 film *Strike* – but they may have been the first to use it for expressive means in a still image. Lissitzky inaugurated this new means of expression in a self-portrait – a genre consecrated since the Renaissance – as if challenging tradition by affirming his position as an avant-garde artist capable of revolutionising old forms (Fig. 46).

In this photomontage, entitled *The Constructor*, Lissitzky superimposed a head-to-shoulder photographic portrait of himself and a photograph of his hand, palm facing outwards, holding a compass (a constructive tool) on a graph-paper background. In 1927, he used this image of his hand holding a compass again for the cover of the architecture almanac of the VKhUTEMAS (Fig. 47). In the self-portrait, the compass ironically traces a circle above Lissitzky's head reminiscent of a halo – evidently alluding to the messianic role of the artist-engineer within the new society and to the iconic position Lissitzky afforded himself within the avant-garde – thus operating a circular cut of the field which contrasts with the orthogonal mechanisms covering the surface. In the top left-hand corner of the image, Lissitzky has inscribed his name along with the mathematical symbols X, Y, Z over a geometric motive and his monogram, which he usually used as letterhead. In this image he is represented three times: firstly through his portrait, secondly by a text giving his identity, and thirdly via his artist's signature. Certain prints have even been countersigned in the bottom left-hand corner.

The Constructor, formed by the superimposition of two shots, has become the multiple locus of a dismembered body where the hand has taken the face's place, where the eye has replaced the hand and the wrist the nose. It is a strange image where the absence of depth of field is not caused by routing the subject; it is an ambiguous picture since different objects occupy the same locus – the locus being the graph paper that surfaces through the central figure itself, where the grid-like pattern merges into the regular ridges of the stitching of Lissitzky's ribbed pullover. Behind the interpenetration of the background's space and the figure's space, behind the permutation of the body parts, there is the will to inscribe the iconicity of representative space and to assert that this space can be multiple, taken by various figures without being dominated by one or the other. In *The Constructor*, Lissitzky proposes to apply a logic typical of non-scribal societies – for example, that of cave paintings in Lascaux and Altamira – to plastic representation: a departure from the logic of experiencing

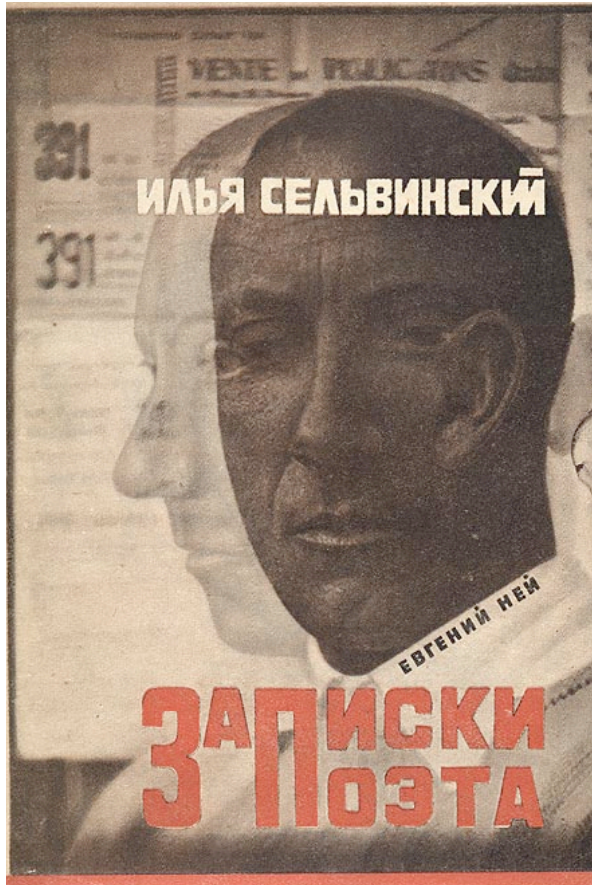


Fig. 48 Cover of Selvinsky's *Notes of a Poet*,
El Lissitzky 1928



Fig. 49 Kurt Schwitters, El Lissitzky 1924

things “one thing at a time”⁶⁵ in favour of experiencing contradiction and simultaneity. This is the formal principle at work in the double portrait Lissitzky made in 1924 of his Dadaist friends Hans Arp and Kurt Schwitters.⁶⁶ For the first, which he described as *profile-en-face*, he used two negatives of different tonal values. The zone superimposed on the three-quarter portrait shot remains perfectly visible. The ear belonging to the profile is placed on the cheek of the three-quarter portrait, while the profile finds itself endowed with the ear belonging to the three-quarter portrait on the right. The manipulation of the negatives prior to printing has produced effects of displacement and translation which render the image’s space multiple and simultaneous similar to Janus Bifrons, playing the double game of friendship and betrayal. It is likely that, through this portrait, Lissitzky wanted to show the difficult relations he had with Hans Arp since their collaboration on *The Isms of Art* in 1925.⁶⁷ Evidence of this resides in the fact that he used the portrait again in 1928 when working on the cover of Ilya Selvinsky’s *Notes of a Poet* whose hero had a dual personality (Fig. 48). For the double portrait of Kurt Schwitters, he also staged a multiple body in a multiple locus where the overlap of two negatives of equal density produces indistinct and dark zones (Fig. 49).

Similarly, in a film poster by Nikolai Prusakov and in another by Prusakov and Evrenii Borisov, one can see effects of transparency coupled with movement simulation – recalling the effects of overlap described above. On parts treated as vertical or horizontal frames, a face can be both the wheel of a motorcycle and a pictorial space composed of parallel streaks; and a horse can be both an automobile and a kinetic motif. In this type of representation related to cinema, artists have been able to show that plasticity also has the means to reproduce movement, while proving that figurative space has the capacity to be the locus of different simultaneous actions.

Constructivist Page Design and Photomontage: A European Perspective

The following section will broadly span the situation of Constructivist photomontage throughout Europe and discuss the constellation of artists involved in using this technique. This will provide an idea of the scope and variety of photomontage use and how wide its effects rippled. At this time a wave of revolutionary movements spread over the European continent and this radicalised the international Constructivist movement further. Constructivism was truly an international avant-garde movement, with proponents in Soviet Russia, of course, but also in Poland, Hungary, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Holland, Belgium and Germany. In comparison, the contribution of French artists to Constructivist

⁶⁵ The expression comes from Marshall McLuhan who uses it to define the formal visual logic of typography at work in all our perceptive and intellectual conducts; see Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, op.cit., pp 199-263.

⁶⁶ See Alan Birnholz, *El Lissitzky 1890-1941*, PhD Thesis (Yale University, 1973)

⁶⁷ See Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers (ed.), *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, op. cit., p. 49.

page design appears to be meagre, largely because of the more dominant role Dada and Surrealist artists played in the French avant-garde. As indicated by the title, the focus will not be exclusively on El Lissitzky, although failing to mention the artist who played the role of ambassador of Constructivism would deny the importance of his relations with Europe, and more particularly Berlin. El Lissitzky, who was born and worked in Russia, lived in Berlin from 1921 to 1925. He actively supported Constructivism's transformation into an international movement. He helped spread the new ideology through writings and designs published in international publications, and by organising exhibitions. His design for a book entitled *Suprematist Story about Two Squares in Six Constructions* and his layout for Mayakovsky's poem *For the Voice*, both published in Berlin in 1922, became landmarks in the history of avant-garde page design. Lissitzky also wrote articles and manifestoes on the principles of modern typography.⁶⁸ As a promoter of the new design, Lissitzky sought to rationalise and streamline its principles by emphasising technological progress and the visual elements of typography. He embraced all new technologies that made the production and distribution of visual and verbal information more efficient. He envisioned the advance of photomechanical and electronic technologies, predicting the increasing role of information and media forms in later twentieth-century society in the essays "Topography of Typography" (1923) and "Our Book" (1929).

Promoting the concerns of function, organisation and communication, Rodchenko, Stepanova, Klucis, Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg, and other Constructivists designed all forms of printed matter, including posters, broadsides and catalogues. They also used these functional forms as paradigms of Constructivist page design for less utilitarian products such as books of poetry and fiction. Constructivist book covers often resemble posters, with illustrations consisting of photographs and geometric designs and patterns. For example, Lissitzky's layout for Mayakovsky's *For the Voice* includes index tabs as if it were an address book or a technical manual, with the illustrations incorporating fragments of commercial printing that often resemble signage and diagrams (Fig. 50).

Advertising and propaganda became dominant elements in the work of the Constructivists. In fact, the changing relationship between these two related areas of their work reflected the evolving social and political context of the Russian avant-garde. While Constructivism emerged during the years of "War Communism" (1917-1922), as artists embraced the role of propagandists for the new political system, the movement's greatest development occurred

⁶⁸ El Lissitzky, "Topographie der Typographie", in: *Merz*, no. 4 (July 1923); p.47; "Typographischen Tatsachen", in: *Gutenberg-Festschrift*, Mainz 1925; "Unser Buch", in: *Gutenberg-Festschrift*, Mainz 1926-1927. These texts can all be found in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers (ed.), *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (New York Graphic Society: Greenwich, Connecticut, 1968).



Fig. 50 Layout for Mayakovsky's *For the Voice*, El Lissitzky 1923

during the New Economic Policy (NEP) from 1921 to 1929 when the economy revived. During this period, market forces, combined with a climate of political idealism, prompted writers and artists such as Mayakovsky and Rodchenko to shift their attention to advertising. Rodchenko designed advertisements, financial prospectuses, product packaging and film posters. Propaganda never lost its central role because the state controlled the largest industries, and it still gained greater force during the Stalinist era.

Although political developments in the rest of Europe between the two world wars were different, there are parallels between the evolution of the avant-garde in the USSR and elsewhere. The end of World War I brought about a wave of revolutions and revolutionary movements in Europe that radicalised the international avant-garde, which identified with the Communist agenda in many cases. As in the USSR, many young artists throughout Europe shifted their interests from the traditional media of painting and sculpture to design, typography, photography and film. New avant-garde journals soon appeared throughout Europe. Often edited by well-known writers and artists, these publications created networks that crossed borders. They provided an international showcase for avant-garde art based on the vision of a new social order expressed through the aesthetic of functionalism and geometric construction.

In Poland Wladyslaw Strzeminski and Mieczyslaw Szczuka, and their partners Katarzyna Kobro and Teresa Zarnower, were proponents of Constructivist page design and of an avant-garde movement associated with journals and reviews such as *BLOK*. While Szczuka abandoned painting and sculpture, Strzeminski, who studied in Saint Petersburg and Moscow and was active in early Russian Constructivist circles, did not. In addition to painting and writing theoretical tracts on art, including his *Unism in Painting*, published in 1928, he pursued typographical experiments throughout the 1920s and organised a school of modern typography in Lodz during the early 1930s. Szczuka identified with the most radical wing of Constructivism; he was drawn to its utilitarian stance, which led him to use the printed page as his preferred medium and to work in the field of architecture as well. Szczuka also became a theoretician and practitioner of photomontage, and celebrated the technological modernisation of artistic techniques. He chose photomontage as a new medium of visual communication which corresponded to the standards of an industrialised mass society – in a far superior manner than painting. In Szczuka's view, photomontage had the economic advantage over easel painting. The former replaced the obsolescent system of manual production of unique art works marked by the artist's individuality with mechanical, precise, quick and inexpensive photographic images designed for mass reproduction and organised according to the rational order of simple, normalised, standardised geometrical figures. Henryk Berlewski, another prominent Polish artist, articulated the concept of *Mechano-Fatura*, which was derived from the machine aesthetic. He established an advertising agency,

Reklama Mechano (1924-1926), where he produced some of the most beautiful examples of Constructivist page design.

In Hungary avant-garde artists and intellectuals involved in the Communist revolution and the short-lived regime of Bela Kun were forced to leave the country in 1919 when the Communist government was defeated by right-wing forces. One of them was Lajos Kassák, a writer, poet, painter and designer who edited and produced the avant-garde magazine *Ma* (Today). Kassák settled in Vienna and continued to publish *Ma*, showcasing works of the international avant-garde including his own Constructivist page designs, which are among the earliest examples of the genre. Ljubomir Micic played a similar role as avant-garde impresario in Yugoslavia, publishing the international journal *Zenit* (1921-1926) in Zagreb and Belgrade. Like Kassák, Micic was a writer, poet and designer who corresponded extensively and collaborated with members of the international avant-garde, including Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, Hannes Mayer, Jozef Peeters and Hendrik Nicolaas Werkman.

Marcel Janco, who was one of the initiators of Dada in Zurich alongside Tristan Tzara, returned to Romania in 1921 to co-found the journal *Contimpporanul* (The Contemporaries, 1922-1932). Other Romanian avant-garde journals and reviews followed through the 1920s, including *Punct* (1924-1925), *Integral* (1925-1928) and *75HP* (1924). These periodicals promoted the international movement, and also provided a platform for Romanian contributions, such as new art forms announced in the manifestoes *Aerogram* and *Pictopoetry*, which were published by Victor Brauner and Eduard Marcus in the first and only issue of *75HP*. *Pictopoetry* was an effort by Brauner and Marcus to merge the acts of seeing text and reading pictures through geometrical designs painted on canvas.⁶⁹ *Pictopoetry* involved including words and word fragments in painting, using them for their visual and organic properties and giving them as much weight in the composition as the other, purely abstract elements. These organic properties are certainly reminiscent of Hausmann's vision of the world as organic and dynamic system and Höch's association of the cosmological with the organic, both discussed in Chapter 1.

Similar efforts were pursued by Czech artists in various other media. The avant-garde movement in Czechoslovakia was represented by Devetsil (1920-1931), a group that published the reviews *Disk* (1923 and 1925), *Pasmo* (1924-1926) and *ReD* (1927-1931). Their leader, Karel Teige, who edited and designed *Disk* and *ReD*, was one of the foremost theoreticians and artists of Constructivist page design. With the painter Jindrich Styrsky, another Devetsil member, he developed photomontages called *picture poems* that were seen

⁶⁹ See Michael Ilk, *Brancusi, Tzara und Rumänische Avantgarde* (Museum Bochum & Kunsthal Rotterdam: Bochum, 1997).

by their authors as a step toward the fusion of modern painting with modern poetry.⁷⁰ First published in 1923, these picture poems combined geometric compositions with themes of modern life. Teige and other fellow Devetsil members described this formula as a compound of construction and poetry, and often used it in their page design. Guillaume Apollinaire also developed such visual poetry techniques by using pictograms, although organic forms always dominate (see, for instance, *Alcools*). Other artists such as Ladislav Sutnar and Zdenek Rossmann favoured the concept of functional design or functionalism in their work, paralleling contemporary developments in Germany and Holland. During the 1920s and 1930s, many other Czech artists applied avant-garde ideas to page design, bringing it into the mainstream of mass culture at an early stage.

Holland was another country with a robust avant-garde movement that took up page design as a vital mode of expression. Among its early practitioners were artists associated with the magazine *Wendingen* (1918-1931), including Johannes Ludovicus Mattheus Lauweriks and H.A. van Anrooy, as well as members of the *De Stijl* group, especially Vilmos Huszar and Theo van Doesburg. As mentioned earlier, *De Stijl* artists were among the first to explore the language of hard-edge geometric form. Such a mode of spatial representation was based on the diagonal and used to highlight the illusionism of simple photographic presentation. This type of composition is often found in the works of Gustav Klucis and Alexander Rodchenko, as described in the section entitled “Geometric Cut and Montage” of this chapter. Van Doesburg made groundbreaking contributions to the evolution of this language by transforming the vertical/horizontal grid into a diagonal composition. Piet Zwart and Paul Schuitema, two artists most often associated with Dutch avant-garde page design, covered a wide range of design modes from purely geometric compositions to photomontage and photography. By working with industries as well as by educating younger designers, Zwart and Schuitema laid the foundations for a flourishing and influential twentieth-century design movement.⁷¹

The Belgian artists Jozef Peeters, Karel Maes, Jos Leonard and Paul Joostens also participated in the flourishing avant-garde enterprise. While drawing primarily on the ideas of Dada and Constructivism, they were also open to other international currents. Their flagship publication was the review *Het Overzicht* (1921-1925), founded by Peeters and Michel Seuphor, and featuring designs by local and international artists. The Belgian artists often made geometric compositions which were also published abroad in avant-garde journals and

⁷⁰ See Karel Teige, “Malirstvi a poesie” (Painting and Poetry), in: *Disk*, number 1 (1923); pp 19-20.

⁷¹ See Kees Boos and Paul Hefting, *Dutch Graphic Design: A Century* (MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992); and Alston Purvis, *Dutch Graphic Design 1918-1948* (Van Nostrand Reinhold: New York, 1992).

reviews, including the Yugoslav *Zenit* and the Hungarian *Ma*, as well as the French *Manomètre* and the German *Der Sturm*.

Many artists in Germany took a prominent role in the evolution of page design, the Bauhaus school of design, art and architecture, founded in Weimar in 1919, became this discipline's most visible incubator. A book entitled *Staatliche Bauhaus Weimar 1919-1923* (1923), with a cover designed by Herbert Bayer and interior layout by Moholy-Nagy, communicated the school's mission, philosophy and method. In its design and content the book represented Bauhaus ideals that emphasised the role of technology, the importance of collaboration and the nature of materials. This and other Bauhaus publications – most importantly, a series consisting of thirteen titles on subjects from architecture to photography and film, under the umbrella title *Bauhausbücher* – popularised new page design in Germany and abroad. Although it was a state-operated school, the Bauhaus was a truly international institution because of the diversity of its faculty and student body and its impact on art and art education throughout Europe. The school was organised into workshops, including a printing workshop led by Herbert Bayer (from 1925 to 1928) and Joost Schmidt (from 1928 to 1933), and courses related to the printed page taught by Moholy-Nagy and Josef Albers, among others.

Other artists and institutions also contributed to the development of avant-garde page design in Germany, including Jan Tschichold in Berlin, Walter Dexel in Jena and Magdeburg, Max Burchartz in Bochum and Essen, Johannes Molzahn in Magdeburg and Kurt Schwitters in Hannover. Together with Bauhaus artists they were involved in the formation of a movement called *New Typography*. This austere elegant new style became an international design language during the late 1920s. It was popularised by Tschichold's book *Die Neue Typographie* (1928) and by the publicity and the organisational activities of a group of artist-designers called the *Ring "Neue Werbegestalter"*. Established in January 1928, the group's first members were Willi Baumeister, Max Burchartz, Walter Dexel, Cesar Domela, Robert Michel, Kurt Schwitters, Georg Trump, Jan Tschichold and Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart. Shortly thereafter they established communication with artist-designers in other countries such as Holland and Czechoslovakia, including Piet Zwart, Paul Schuitema, Karel Teige and Ladislav Sutnar, creating a stellar international network of artist-designers.⁷²

While absorbing the lessons of geometric abstract art from Neoplasticism to Constructivism, New Typography sought to create an international optical language based on simplicity, clarity and function. Its adherents employed photography, photomontage, asymmetrical composition, and sans serif typefaces. They designed new type styles based on simple geometric forms, and sought to eliminate upper case letters altogether. Avant-garde

⁷² See "*Typographie kann unter Umständen Kunst Sein*", volume 2, *Ring "Neue Werbegestalter"*. *Die Amsterdamer Ausstellung 1931* (Landesmuseum: Wiesbaden, 1990)

artists believed that these innovations would lay the foundations for a new society in which form would follow function, and the economical use of materials and techniques would contribute to a just social order.⁷³

But the ideals of New Typography and the international avant-garde in general were soon tested by the real world of politics and economics. The utopian nature of their ideals made artists susceptible to the temptations of ideology and, consequently, to corruption by the seemingly boundless influence of the totalitarian regimes in power. In the 1930s, a number of avant-garde artists turned into (or were forced to become) propagandists for Stalin or Hitler. Characteristically, the Nazis borrowed ideas from communist propaganda, including elements of Constructivist design such as photomontage. These shifts, together with a pervasive feeling of disillusionment, led Tschichold, among others, to modify or abandon New Typography, returning instead to classical design principles. Mounting political pressure made it difficult or impossible for artists to further their ideals during the 1930s and through World War II. A number of them including Moholy-Nagy, Ladislav Sutnar, Friedrich Kiesler, Josef Albers and Hans Richter fled Nazi Germany for America, where they reinvigorated the evolution of avant-garde page design. Many of the immigrant artists taught at university level and introduced avant-garde design, founded graphic design departments, and educated new generations of American designers during the 1940s and 1950s.⁷⁴

The work of Ladislav Sutnar illustrates just one of the fates and paths of the pioneers of Constructivist design and New Typography. Sutnar served as director of the State School of Graphic Arts in Prague and artistic director of *Co-operative Work*, an association that was politically aligned with the Social Democratic Party and that promoted modern design in Czechoslovakia between the two world wars. Sutnar shunned the simplifications and slogans of Communist ideology and instead focussed on the logic of visual communication in his designs for books, periodicals, catalogues and other printed matter. His primary concern was how information is processed through the medium of the printed page. In 1939 Sutnar left Prague for New York, where he developed his theories further. While working as a designer for corporations – in consumer and business products, service advertising, public relations brochures, promotional catalogues, and corporate identity design – he had already used the term “information design” and advanced concepts such as visual interest, visual unity, and the

⁷³ For a discussion on the utopian character of the New Typography, see Leonie ten Duis and Annelies Haas, *The World Must Change: Graphic Design and Idealism* (Uitgeverij De Buitenkant, Museum van het Boek: Amsterdam and The Hague, 1994)

⁷⁴ Moholy-Nagy was named director of the New Bauhaus in Chicago (1937), Kiesler taught at Columbia, Sutnar was on the faculty of the Pratt Institute, and Albers was a professor at Black Mountain College in North Carolina and helped to establish the design programme at Yale, which became one of the most influential in the country.

control of visual flow.⁷⁵ Here Sutnar followed the lead of his close collaborator Knud Lönberg-Holm, thus building another important bridge in New York between the European avant-garde and American architecture and design.⁷⁶

“With the world becoming increasingly smaller, a new sense of world interdependence comes sharply into focus. And with it a new need for visual information capable of worldwide comprehension becomes evident. This will require many new types of visual information, simplified information systems, and improved forms and techniques. It will also make urgent the development of mechanical devices for information processing, integration and transmission. These advances will also have their influence on the design of visual information for domestic consumption”.⁷⁷ This visionary statement by Ladislav Sutnar, which reads as if it were written today, summarises his efforts and indicates how he charted the way from the utopian ideas of the 1920s to the information society emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Although still chiefly associated with famous artists such as John Heartfield and Alexander Rodchenko, photomontage is also widely viewed as the clearest instance of a compositional method that typified and even identified the “left” avant-garde with the modern era – roughly spanning the advent of Dada to the reactionary regimes in Russia and Germany in the mid 1930s. This identification marks the onset of a series of limitations, which begin to define an agenda for the study of montage today.

To ask how much the pioneering principle of rupture can be recuperated in present day cultural work is also to ask how far the montage of the earlier avant-garde depended for its effectiveness upon an optic of spatially coherent, continuous and legible imagery, propagated by the organs of the masculinist state for processes of normalisation and indoctrination. The suggestion is that montage lived within, but could not exceed, that historical framework. Against such historical anchoring, however, is a great deal of effective contemporary art that uses montage for its technical flexibility and for its capacity to skirt around established genres in the male-dominated canon of modernist and post-modernist approaches – particularly, in the recent female, art production in a variety of media, for instance, that of Barbara Krüger. It is clear that montage still appeals to many “left” agitational artists precisely because of its resonances back to the principal (and principled) male artists of earlier decades. These

⁷⁵ See Ladislav Sutnar and Knud Lönberg-Holm, *Catalog Design* (Sweet’s Catalog Service: New York, 1944) and *Designing Information* (Whitney Publications: New York, 1947). The term “information design” only gained wider usage in the last decade of the twentieth century as it became an important new branch of science and business. See Robert Jacobson (ed.), *Information Design* (MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999).

⁷⁶ Knud Lönberg-Holm hired Sutnar for Sweet’s Catalog Service and led Sutnar to explore parallels between traffic and information processing in his *Controlled Visual Flow* (Marquardt and Co.: New York 1943) as well as *Catalog Design Progress* (Sweet’s Catalog Service: New York, 1950), co-authored with Knud Lönberg-Holm.

⁷⁷ Ladislav Sutnar, *Visual Design in Action* (Hastings House Publishers: New York, 1961); p.61.

connections and separations already imply that the topic of montage is still of great relevance, and that sorting out its methods and affiliations is very much a part of contemporary culture.

A potent question arises out of the fact that the historical enclosure of the montage principle within the period 1918 to 1935 is itself prone to certain conundrums and difficulties of generalisation. For there is more than a suspicion that montage was not confined to the great figures – Heartfield, Hausmann, Rodchenko, Klucis and a few others – in whose hands it became a luminous and severely oppositional technique, but extended to become, or derived on part from, its widespread use by dozens of advertisers, page lay-out artists, designers and typographers, who deployed rupture as a compositional principle for all kinds of purposes connected with the marketing of goods and lifestyles in a modern way. This last argument wants us to revise, effectively, the pedestals upon which we place Our Heartfields and Rodchenkos, and attend seriously to the pay-off between the high art of “committed” montage and the low culture of consumption, anonymous design, sweet wrappers and travel brochures – contemporary visual culture in an all-embracing sense.

The next chapter will be the object of another avant-garde movement, called Surrealism, whose treatment of the photomontage technique departed radically from the organised composition system used by the Constructivists. Although pioneered by Dada, photomontage was rarely employed by Surrealist photographers. Nonetheless, photomontage’s presumed eccentricity to the Surrealist practice calls for revision: it must indeed be remembered that photographic cut-outs were the major visual resource of Surrealist periodicals. Throughout the avant-garde in the 1920s, photomontage was understood as a means for infiltrating the representation of reality with meaning – by the means of juxtaposition. This did not escape the Surrealists, for whom photomontage represented the ideal locus for the incongruous juxtaposition of commonplace objects.

CHAPTER THREE: Machining the Unconscious – Technology in the Service of a New Art

The use of machine-made parts, objects and materials is a broad concept actually including any manufacture in its fullest sense – goods or wares made by labour or by machinery. Kurt Schwitters, for example, chose such materials, not on the basis of machine versus manual technologies but rather of the discarded or lost. Similarly, his concept of *Merz* does not seem to have made any particular distinction between two-dimensional paper collages, relief constructions, actual three-dimensional constructions, and montage made environment or architecture, as in the *Merzbau* (Fig. 51). The term manufacture in its wider sense thus includes handicraft like the old wood panel with antique wrought iron hinges used by Mirò in his 1927 construction *Shutter*.

The camera is one of the earliest art-producing machines. Earlier artist's aids such as those used to indicate and measure aerial perspective, or the pantograph, which is a mechanical means to reduce or enlarge images, were evidently not as efficient. Many artists have used the camera as art-producing machine to aid their own artwork. Degas, for example, used photography extensively and this is credited, together with Japanese prints, in his development of the tilted horizontal plane, the unposed or candid camera pose, and the decentralised composition with objects and figures partially cut off a picture's edge. It must be emphasised that artists used photographs not to copy but to clarify their vision and to explore pictorial possibilities. As an independent art-producing machine, however, the camera has in some cases – as with Edward Steichen, who assumed a pictorialist stance in his photography – come to replace painting altogether.

The machine aesthetic, implicit in Cubist practice and Futurist theory, first became explicit in the pre-Dada work of Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia. In 1911, even before *Bicycle wheel*, Duchamp painted the first modern picture in which the *deus ex machina* actually sat as artist's model: humble domestic machinery – a coffee mill. In the painting, the coffee grinder's handle is shown in multiple positions while, stripped of its outer casing, the mechanism produces the flow of coffee. Public machinery followed: a chocolate grinder outlined in stretched string glued to a painting. No other artist has seen the meaning of the machine in terms as final as those of Marcel Duchamp, who took the traditional criteria of uniqueness and originality of the work of art to new extremes. Since its advent, the machine has haunted modern art; it has hypnotised and obsessed artists as major theme, as actual medium, as psychological

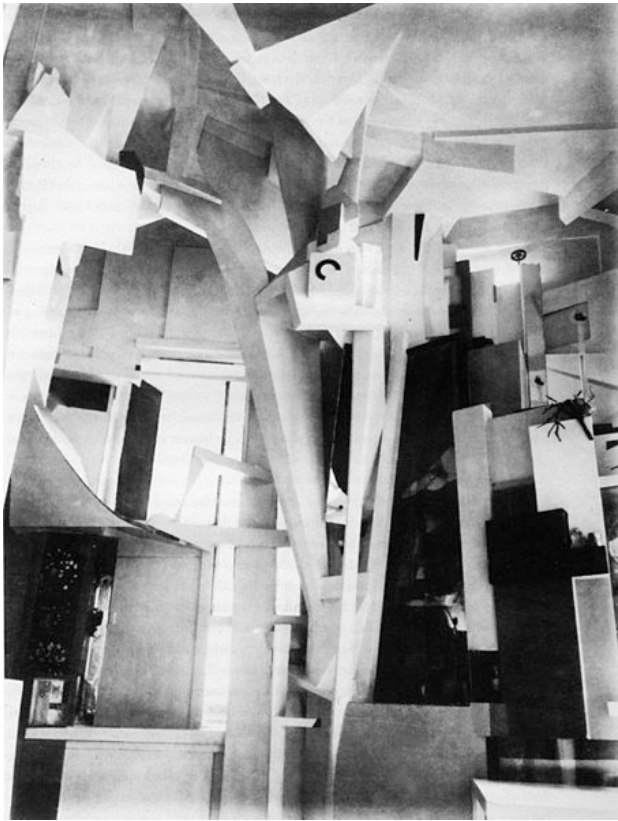


Fig. 51 *Merzbau* Hannover, Kurt Schwitters, 1933



Fig. 52 *Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale*, Max Ernst, 1924

overtone, and as inspiration. Machinism has become an integral part of modern art and machine-made images integrated the very core of artistic production.

With the Surrealists, the concept of Machinism was significantly important in contexts wherein any artefact, machine-made or handmade, was made to seem unreal and dreamlike. The house and hinged gate in Max Ernst's famous painting-collage-relief, *Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale* (Fig. 52), may have been made by Ernst or found as ready-mades – it makes no essential difference because they are parts of a dream landscape. Similar considerations apply to materials included in other Surrealist works, for example André Breton's *Poème objet*, with its hand-carved torso and faceless head, ancient lantern and boxing gloves bursting through the picture surface.

No such ambiguities are harboured in the work of the Russian Constructivist Naum Gabo, for instance. His 1930 *Construction in a Niche* (Fig. 53) is a good example of the Constructivists' adoption and frank use of technological materials like vinyl plastics as soon as they were developed for industrial use.

A far more baffling and basic question is now brought into play, one that is inherent to so much art today: can a specific work be defined solely in terms of picture, object, painting, photograph, construction or sculpture? The ambivalence of montage material has introduced shifts in space, substance, identity and meaning; traditional terminology compounds the confusion. With hindsight we can now state that we have entered an era where montage and its manifold derivatives engage the majority of modern artists. There is such a wide array of activities related to the technique of montage that it undermines established categorisation and compartmentalisation – applying these rigid categories is no longer relevant.

Much of today's sculpture would, not so long ago, have been totally inadmissible as such even from a technical point of view. Assemblies of rusty iron junk, or scraps and tatters of metal, old or new, glued together by welding and modern synthetic adhesives, or abstract vanes of sheet metal swinging in the air, or even taut, drawn wires defining complex aesthetic geometries in space – all of these now ask to be called sculpture.¹ Today all this is acceptable as art, and it seems unimportant whether it be called sculpture or object. The court of last appeal is the basic montage technique: the assemblage of disparate, even hostile, objects snared from the real world and creatively fused into new aesthetic unities.

¹ See for example, works by Alexander Archipenko, Jean Crotti, HC Westermann, Kenneth Martin, Alexander Calder and David Cornell.



Fig. 53 *Construction in a Niche*, Naum Gabo, 1930



Fig. 54 Cover for Péret's *Dormir, dormir dans les pierres*, Yves Tanguy, 1927

Machinism in art, the fascination with the machine and its technological prowess, has allowed the dissolution of the boundaries between the genres. In a broad, diffused sense, the machine's effect on art was felt in the adoption of machine techniques and the employment of machines in painting processes. As we shall see, Max Ernst pioneered a number of such mechanical and semi-mechanical procedures. Among such technologies are the photographic techniques independently developed by a number of artists – it is worth mentioning again that photomontage is not a technique that was widely used by the Surrealists. Nonetheless the use of photographs was widespread as material for montages of all sorts – assemblages, collages and painting – since newspapers and magazines provided a cheap and bottomless resource.

Other experimentations with the photographic film as material consisted in placing objects at random or by design on photographic paper, exposing it to light until the shapes are printed, and then fixing the picture. The result of this abstract photography are so personal that the Zurich Dada Christian Schad called his pictures “Schadographs”, Man Ray called his “Rayographs” while “Photograms” was the term adopted by the Bauhaus professor Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. In 1918 Christian Schad began experimenting in Europe by making cameraless photographic images. By 1919, he was creating photogenic drawings from random arrangements of discarded objects he had collected such as torn tickets, receipts and rags. Schad's new imagery was constructed by taking discarded unimportant objects and arranging them. The photograms created from these arrangements had taken on a new form and meaning not considered previously. These prints were published in 1920 in the magazine *Dadaphone* by Tristan Tzara; who referred to them as “schadographs”.

In 1919, László Moholy-Nagy and his wife, Lucia Moholy, began experimenting with the process of making photograms, and developed a technique they called the photogram, which is the term generally used today. This term was used as a direct comparison with the rapid direct communication of the telegram. Moholy-Nagy considered the “mysteries” of the light effects and the analysis of space as experienced through the photogram to be important principles that he experimentally explored and advanced in his teaching throughout his life.

In 1922, Man Ray experimented with producing images using only light and photographic paper. He called these images “rayographs”, and likened his creations to André Breton's "automatic writing". He produced these rayographs by arranging translucent and opaque objects on photosensitive materials. His techniques included immersing the object in the developer during exposure, and using stationary and

moving light sources.² Man Ray did not invent the photogram, but he breathed life into the technique and gave it a spirit. He moved to Paris in 1921 where he did professional portraits and fashion photography. It was during this time that Man Ray explored many creative aspects of the photogram.

Moholy-Nagy's Bauhaus Photograms and Photoplastics

Moholy-Nagy's version of technology in the service of a new art that could effect social reform, and his notion of light as a fundamental element of art and life make photography the ideal focal point for his theory, while painting composition was the formal basis for his work in the early 1920s. In an essay of 1922, "Production – Reproduction",³ he explained that photography fulfilled his concept of a "productive art". He defined past art as "reproductive", since it involved "the repetition of existing relationships", and called for a new productive art made possible by using modern technology to create "new, previously unknown relationships ... between the known and as yet unknown optical". He noted that photography had "up to now ... used this capacity in a secondary sense only", for the fixation ("reproduction") of single objects, aspiring to fine arts status in its mimesis of painting conventions. He suggested that "in the future ... we exploit the light-sensitivity of the silver bromide plate to receive and to fix upon it light phenomena ... composed by ourselves ...". He further praised astronomical and x-ray pictures as forerunners in the field as well as the abstract film experiments of Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling as "the most perfect work of this kind up to date".⁴ These ideas led to Moholy-Nagy's first real experimentation with his wife Lucia, in the photographic process through photograms, at the time the article was published in the summer of 1922.⁵

Photograms are made by placing objects on light-sensitive paper and exposing the paper to light. The result is a dark-grounded negative image with the objects appearing as silhouettes, seemingly suspended in an aperspectival space. Thus the photogram embodies Moholy-Nagy's preoccupation with light and his interest in process; experimentation and active participation rather than the static object and passive response. The materials used in the creation of photograms were also important to

² Quoted in: Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography* (Abbeville Press: New York, 1997); p.394.

³ Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, 'Production—Reproduction,' *De Stijl*, number 7, 1922, pp 97-101. Translated and reprinted in Krisztina Passuth's *Moholy-Nagy* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985).

⁴ Passuth, op. cit.; ibidem.

⁵ Passuth, op. cit.; ibidem.

Moholy-Nagy not as objects, but for their own properties, such as texture and transparency. This is consistent with his early interest in the scrap *Merz* montages of Kurt Schwitters, as Sibyl Moholy-Nagy related: “After Schwitters’s collages had opened Moholy’s eyes to the *Gestalt* value of integrated symbolic elements, he discovered the photogram”.⁶ Moholy-Nagy wrote in the journal *Die Form*: “the photogram is the bridge to a new optical *Gestaltung*, one that will no longer be created with canvas, brush and pigment, but rather will be accomplished by the play of light on film”.⁷

Moholy-Nagy’s experimentation with the photogram can be placed within the tradition of light projection experiments begun at the Bauhaus in 1922 on the initiative of Kurt Schwertfeger and Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack. Reflected light compositions were created by superimposing and moving templates of various colours in front of a spotlight which was then projected onto the back of a transparent screen. These light plays have also been compared to the abstract film animations made by Eggeling and Richter that Moholy-Nagy so admired.

However, there are essential differences between reflected light compositions, Constructivist paintings and photograms. Moving light compositions were created by manipulating translucent parallel planes moving in two directions in space. Most Constructivist paintings were static creations of two-dimensional planes within an indeterminate space. The photogram, on the other hand, described the volumes of the objects from which it was created (along with light), thus displaying real tonal gradations within its abstract space. Moholy-Nagy often used a moving light source in his photograms, thus conveying volume, time (at the production stage), and space. These qualities bring the photogram conceptually closer to film than to the other two media.

Moholy-Nagy began making photomontages around 1922-1923, just before his arrival at the Bauhaus, and his work in straight camera photography began in 1924. Photomontages and photograms served as bridges between representation and abstraction in different ways. The images in photomontage, while representation in *strictu sensu*, convey new and equally abstract meanings when they are taken out of context and manipulated by the artist. On the other hand, photograms record, by the action of light, the images of assembled objects to create abstract pictures.

⁶ See Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Experiment in Totality* (Harper & Brothers: New York, 1950), for an account of Moholy-Nagy’s discovery of the photogram.

⁷ Moholy-Nagy, László, “Fotogramm und Grenzgebiete” *Die Form*, Volume 4, Number 10, (Berlin, 1929).

Moholy-Nagy saw the photographic image as “the most reliable aid to a beginning of objective vision.”⁸ He was aware that vision changes according to culture and describes this as the reason for his interest in the photogram, or cameraless photography. Moholy-Nagy thought people did not yet know of the possibilities, at least artistically, of photography: according to him, photography could extend “the limits of the depiction of nature and the use of light as a creative agent: chiaroscuro in place of pigment.”⁹ His primary concern was to have his hand on the pulse of the times, so that he saw his photograms as investigations into the consciousness of modern life. Moholy-Nagy felt that, to understand, one must embrace what is, take our modern experience and, in the face of its psychological deprivations, strive to understand it and make art of it.

Moholy-Nagy accepted that every material and field of activity, such as painting, had its own independent laws and mission, escaping judgment from the standpoint of any other. Thus, in order to investigate the special properties and possibilities of photography, the photogram held the key, since the operator could directly manipulate the action of light on the photographic paper or plate. Although the camera could be used to record light compositions constructed from refracting or deflecting agents, Moholy-Nagy fixed what he described as the more fruitful, moving “differentiated play of light and shadow” directly onto photographic paper without a camera.

In the periodical, *Broom*, of March 1923, his earliest illustrated article on the subject spoke of his having made “a few primitive attempts” which awaited further, experimental refinement when adequate facilities became available. Using lenses and mirrors, he had “passed light through fluids like water, oil, acids, crystal, metal, glass, tissue, etc”, casting the filtered, reflected, or refracted light onto a screen for photographing, or directly onto the sensitive plate without a camera. A composition which includes his abbreviated name “Mo”, and, as usual, echoes his painterly layouts (in this case, the cellular division of *A XI*, 1923-1924) was among the illustrations. When he and his first wife, Lucia, moved to the Weimar Bauhaus in spring 1923, they continued privately to produce photograms on daylight-paper which allowed them to watch the way the sun or diffused daylight was darkening the paper around the shielding forms of the solid or translucent objects. It was only from 1926, after the Bauhaus moved to Dessau, that they did have access to proper technical facilities,

⁸ Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film* (The MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1969); p. 28.

⁹ Moholy-Nagy (1969), op. cit.; p. 7.

provided specially for Lucia's photographic record work following her training in Weimar and Leipzig in 1923. Lucia had stressed that, for reasons of economy, they used only paper-based emulsions ranging from 13x18cm to 18x24cm, so every one was a unique specimen; and only at Dessau did facilities permit the use of artificial light papers or "Gaslight" papers (Kunstlichtpapier) on which, as Moholy-Nagy noted, the progress of the generation of the picture could not be watched. The results were, in fact, negatives and their potent whites balancing great planes of lustrous black by relative quantity, direction, and position, as well as the "wonderful softness of interpenetrating grey values" created "a permeating light action" that excited him. Although positives could be obtained from these negatives, he indicated their "harsher, frequently ashy grey values". For Moholy-Nagy, the light-sensitive layer was a clean sheet on which notes could be made in light, just as the painter used brush and pigment on canvas, thus the possibilities of working with light opened up possibilities never before presented by earlier painting. In his book, *Vision in Motion* (1944-1946) he described the photogram as vision in motion, because, like a diagram of the motion of light it created a space-time continuum. The photogram procedure suggested to him the means of producing the "absolute filmic art", using for example adjustable slits or patterns through which light intensity would be modified to vary the film-exposure continually, and thus provide a fluxing programme. He concluded that the master of *cameraless* photograms would most obviously be able to work subsequently with the camera.

And this led him to experiment further in the field of photography with the photomontage. Moholy-Nagy used the term photomontage for his works in retrospect, in the 1920s, and distinguished strictly between them and their immediate predecessors, the Dadaist photomontages, with their brutally cut elements which often lost any meaning in their disjointed, highly individualistic connections. However, he admitted that his photoplastics, as well as his photograms, were the outcome of Dada's influence, Schwitters's *Merz* painting, and Cubist collages. Moholy-Nagy proposed photoplastics as a clear demonstration of the way imitative photography could be made more purposeful and creative by expanding on the Futurists' attempts to express directly the way we experience many events at once – that is, simultaneity. He employed the then recent example of a provincial visitor's paralysed bewilderment faced with the unfamiliar, multifarious sounds of traffic and commercial life on Berlin's Potsdamer Platz (circa 1927) to show how vast technical developments and the growth of cities had extended and sharpened the city-dweller's senses. He argued

there was comparable simultaneous complexity on the visual front: “one travels in the tramcar, looks out of the window behind, drives a car. likewise the windows of this car are transparent. through them one sees a shop, which in turn has a transparent window. inside, people, shoppers and traders. another person opens the door. in front of the shop walk passersby. the traffic policeman stops a cyclist. one grasps all of that in a single moment, because the panes are transparent and everything is happening in the line of sight.”¹⁰

He wanted to demonstrate this kind of experience, an organised synthesis of such mixed events, including mental associations, in a lucid and condensed dimension which would involve the objective records of camera photography, unified, but in unexpected tensions with drawn additions, producing what he called composition with new objectives, “a railway-track of ideas”.

Moholy-Nagy felt that photoplastics would express the consciousness of the future, and were uniquely capable of effecting, even in subliminal ways, “amusing, stirring, overwhelming, satirical, visionary, revolutionary, etc, results”. Their titles were calculated “to meet the understanding half-way”, and while some of them already might bear more than one title, the significant “convincing truth” might frequently be reached by the spectator's own further suggestions. Their very topicality can now perhaps make them appear rather obscure since the world and values that they express are remote. He saw their application in, for instance, theatre or film scripts where the whole programme could be summarised on a single sheet; and in cinema posters, which would present a suitable synthesis of the film rather than convey whole scenes in poetic colours as was then the custom.

Surrealism: Semantic and Visual Construction/Deconstruction

The Surrealist group – which included Max Ernst, André Masson, Joan Miro, Man Ray and Yves Tanguy – became known for their attacks on social conventions, a collective interest in fantasy and eroticism and explorations into the irrational. Often invoking Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis to support their agenda, they shared the belief that a revolution from the outside must be complemented by a revolution from within. The main strategy of the Surrealists was to dissociate objects, bodies and forms from their usual contexts, a process that made even the most ordinary things enigmatic and ambiguous. Just as the greater “reality” of the photographic image informs

¹⁰ The punctuation was left as found in the quote (was this intended by the author?) It is worth noting that this is a translation into English. Laszlo Moholy Nagy, op.cit.; p. 9.

political photomontage, the drawn caricature lies in opposition to the cut-out photographs, so it can all the more disrupt our perception of the normal world and create marvellous images. By the juxtaposition of elements by nature strange to one another, hallucinatory landscapes are formed; commonplace objects become enigmatic when moved to a new environment. This provided Surrealist work a unique urgency reminiscent of dreams. The dream as a window on the unconscious became a paradigm of Surrealist art. Artists and writers saw the dream as a prime example of psychic automatism (an uninterrupted flow of words and images from the brain) – a concept that became central to Surrealism and was often identified with the name of the movement.

Unlike other twentieth-century artists who came before them, the Surrealists did not explore the distinction between signs and reality. Instead, they embraced the concept that any fragment of reality could function as a sign and thereby have meaning. This semantic construct enabled poets and painters to dislodge signs and objects from their traditional contexts to establish new relationships between the sign, everyday life and the dream. Through their dictum “revelation-revolution”, they sought to release suppressed desires and human nature from the constraints of society, forcing a redefinition of the relationship between the individual and society.

The emphasis they placed on chance is derived from a phrase from Comte de Lautréamont – a French Romantic writer whom the Surrealists adopted as their direct predecessor – that described the meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table. This phrase was rendered by Man Ray in the magazine *Minotaure*¹¹ as a montage introducing a questionnaire about the most momentous encounters of one’s life; it also found innumerable interpretations and paraphrases in poems, paintings, drawings, photographs and films. *Un chien andalou*, a film by Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali, includes many juxtapositions, such as the famous montaged sequence of the corpse of mules on a piano.

The Surrealists found rich sources of new material by appropriating images from advertisements, picture postcards, dime novels and commercial films. For instance, the Fantomas series of popular novels and films made in France inspired paintings by René Magritte and photomontages by Jindrich Styrsky. The motif of hidden images, typical of riddles, was often seen in paintings and drawings by Dali. The Surrealists created a new visual language that had a huge impact on twentieth-century visual arts and literature by introducing *objets trouvés* in their work. This concept pervaded

¹¹ Volume 1, number 3-4, 1933.

Surrealist painting, sculpture and photography, and grew into its own category associated with the “Surrealist object”. In 1927, while citing the example of Duchamp’s ready-mades, André Breton – who, more than anyone else, was instrumental in this development – talked about the instigation of a “total revolution of the object acting to direct the object from its ends”.¹² Between 1934 and 1935, Breton extended this concept by introducing the idea of *rêves-objets* and *poèmes-objets*, as he combined handwritten words with three-dimensional objects on the page.

The structural principle of montage, through the medium of collage,¹³ was viewed as the ideal tool for probing the depth of the unconscious. It enabled Surrealist artists and writers to simulate mental processes described by Freud and to recreate characteristics typical of dreams. Isolating individual objects or situations from their original context and transposing them into a different frame of reference; changing or juxtaposing disparate spatial and temporal scales; revealing or suggesting hidden ambiguities – such visual or verbal reconstructions appeared through the medium of collage in works that had the vividness of dreams. Indeed most Surrealists referred to their work as collage, although it included all sorts of materials and different supports – in the scope of the present thesis the term montage seems more appropriate to describe these wide-ranging practices.

For Max Ernst, it was nineteenth-century wood engravings that inspired his greatest work in montage. In the early 1920s he collaborated with Hans Arp and Paul Eluard on several books, and by the end of the decade Ernst had developed a new form that he called the collage novel, such as *La femme 100 têtes* (1929) – the homonymic title has a double meaning in French: the 100-headed woman and the headless woman – and *Une semaine de bonté* (1934). These extraordinary books construct complex narratives that consist primarily of image sequences. At the same time they present a virtual inventory of Surrealist themes and devices, including the gothic novel, alchemy and Freud’s theories of sexuality and the unconscious. The eye often appears in Ernst’s work and is used by other Surrealist artists and writers to refer to the invisible workings of the mind. For Ernst and the poet Eluard, the eye represented what they called the “interior of seeing”, a phrase that can be read as a metaphoric description of Surrealist aesthetics. They used the phrase in the title *A l’intérieur de la vue: 8 poèmes*

¹² Patrick Waldberg, *Surrealism* (McGraw-Hill Company: New York and Toronto, 1971); p. 86.

¹³ “What is the most noble conquest of collage? The irrational, the magisterial eruption of the irrational in all domain of art, of poetry, of science, in the private life of individuals, in the public life of peoples”. In: Max Ernst, *Beyond Painting and Other Writing by the Artist and His Friends* (Wittenborn: New York, 1948); p. 17.

visibles, a book created with Eluard in 1931 and published in 1947, which also includes a dreamlike image of two rows of eyes facing each other. In 1934, the same phrase and image then appeared in the collage novel *Une semaine de bonté*. René Magritte examined the interplay between reading images and seeing words in his essay “Les mots et les images”. Published in *La révolution surréaliste* in 1929,¹⁴ it explores the relationship between verbal and visual semantics, combined with illustrations that resemble puzzles, riddles and rebuses. Joan Miro introduced words into his paintings in the early 1920s, playing them off against colour blots to engage different characteristics of word and image. He further pursued this strategy in book designs and illustrations as in the children’s book *Il était une petite pie* (1927) by Lise Hirtz, also known under the pseudonym Lise Deharme.

By transplanting the concept of the Surrealist object to the printed page, artists and writers were able to develop visual language in new directions. They perceived text, individual words and letters as objects to be seen in their own right. This concept helped to transform the traditional illustrated books and encouraged collaborations between artists and writers. Yves Tanguy’s cover and title page for Benjamin Péret’s *Dormir, dormir dans les pierres* (Fig. 54) feature letters climbing hills in a Surrealist landscape. In a drawing titled *Vie de l’objet*, published in *le surréalisme au service de la révolution* in April 1933, Tanguy depicts what appears to be a fantastic island with eroded cliffs littered with phrases from a book on botany. André Masson’s cover for Michel Leiris’s *Glossaire j’y serre mes glosses* incorporates the lettering into a visceral tangle of vegetal forms that evoke carnivorous plants through the combined images of flowers and a mouth. Toyen (Marie Cerminova) created photographic assemblages for Jindrich Heisler’s *From the Casemates of Sleep*. This work consists of a printed page emblazoned with miniature objects, creating a new form related to Breton’s *poèmes-objets*, which is characterised by the book’s subtitle *Realised Poems*.

Word as image is also the central theme of *Violette Nozières*, an anthology of texts and pictures by Surrealists inspired by – and titled after – a girl convicted of patricide. This bizarre tribute investigated the many different ways in which a word can be interpreted while celebrating the unconscious through the looking-glass of semantic complexity.

As in Ernst’s *La femme 100 têtes*, sexuality, fetishes and gender-bending imagery appear in unexpected forms in Surrealism, most conspicuously in works by the writers

¹⁴ René Magritte, “Les mots et les images”, *La révolution surréaliste*, number 12 (December 1929).

and painters Breton, Dali, Man Ray and Eluard. In the 1930s, the Czech Surrealists Jindrich Styrsky and Bohuslav Brouk published *Eroticka revue*, whose pornographic texts and drawings were authored both by Surrealist and non-Surrealist artists and writers, including Toyen, one of the rare women Surrealists. The Surrealists discovered in photography and photomontage in particular a potent medium for the exploration of erotic dreams and desires. Claude Cahun took pictures of herself and made photomontages playing on social roles and her own sexual identity. She published ten of these works in her book *Aveux non avenue* in 1930. Jindrich Styrsky combined dreamlike texts with sexually explicit photomontages in *Emily Comes to me in a Dream* (Fig. 55). Hans Bellmer made photographs of a doll whose strangely assembled body parts suggest bizarre sexual fantasies, publishing the pictures in Surrealist magazines and in his book *The Doll* (1934), which appeared in several editions, including *La poupée*, published in Paris in 1936. Georges Hugnet created a series of erotic photo-collages assembled in the volume *La septième face du dé* in 1936, in which text collages were juxtaposed with photomontage nudes (Fig. 56). Man Ray collaborated with the poet Eluard on the book *Facile* (1936), in which Man Ray's nudes of Nusch Eluard in unusual positions frame love poems by her husband, Paul. In this work, Man Ray identified the female body with the space of the page by bleeding photographs across double spreads throughout the book (Fig. 57). Marcel Duchamp's design of the 1947 catalogue for the International Exhibition of Surrealism gave the tactile metaphor of page-as-body an erotic charge by placing a three-dimensional model of a female breast on the cover and instructing the reader to "Please touch".

This important work by Marcel Duchamp exemplifies the Surrealist concept of the page and book as an object. The concept of the book object surfaced again during the 1960s when various artists such as Claes Oldenburg and the Fluxus artists George Maciunas and George Brecht chose to revive the book object as a significant vehicle for their work. This tradition continued through the end of the twentieth century as many artists continued working with the book object as a primary mode of expression.

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¹⁵ See André Breton (ed.), *Trajectoire du rêve* (Guy Lévis-Mano: Paris, 1938).



Fig. 55 *Emily Comes to Me in a Dream*, Jindrich Styrsky, 1933

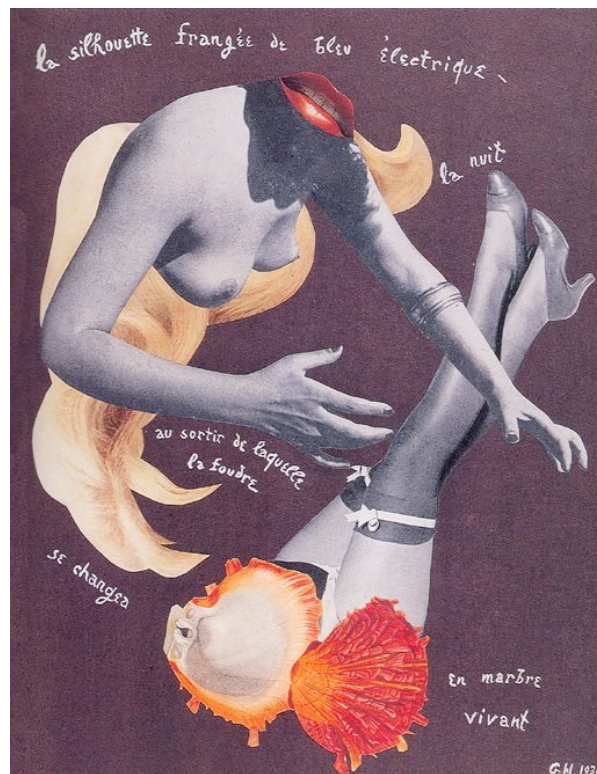


Fig. 56 *La septième face du dé*, Georges Hugnet, 1936

Max Ernst – From Dadamax to Fatagaga

Max Ernst was one of the first artists to systematically explore the disorienting power of combined photographic images, and the possibilities of marvellous transformations of objects, bodies, landscapes and even substance itself down to the smallest detail. It was in Cologne after the end of the First World War, that Ernst began to make, with Hans Arp and Johannes Baargeld, images which opened up new areas of figuration. Ernst manipulated depictions of visible reality. Largely initiated by an accumulated store of form and content, Ernst sifted and dissected it, then rearranged it into new images. On the one hand, this process revealed a Dadaist sense of fun in creating paradoxical new relationships among various elements gleaned from the jetsam of consumer society and received knowledge; on the other, and increasingly, it expressed deep concern about the flood of visual information that threatened to swamp understanding. Yet as even the earliest results of this procedure indicate, Ernst's juxtapositions of non-artistic imagery and materials were governed by a sense of form that lent his works a recognisably unique character.

As Louis Aragon pointed out in his 1923 essay on Ernst,¹⁶ it was the free imagination transpiring and affecting given images that distinguished his collage work from those of others. For Ernst, collage was the conquest of the irrational. This is how Ernst described his first encounter with the medium:

One rainy day in 1919, finding myself in a village on the Rhine, I was struck by the obsession which held under my gaze the pages of an illustrated catalogue showing objects designed for anthropologic, microscopic, psychologic, mineralogic and paleontologic demonstration. There I found brought together elements of figuration so remote that the sheer absurdity of that collection provoked a sudden intensification of the visionary faculties in me and brought forth an illusive succession of contradictory images, double, triple and multiple images, piling up on each other with the persistence and rapidity which are peculiar to love memories and visions of half sleep.¹⁷

For Ernst, the term collage did not simply apply to “collage-découpage”; it also encompassed all processes of combination and variation of materials destined to fixate, in a semi-automatic fashion, pictorial visions. Ernst translated his vision by using the structuring principle that is montage. By using found materials or by the primal, mechanical-subconscious treatment of the pictorial support, Ernst managed to

¹⁶ Louis Aragon, *Les Collages* (Collection Savoir Hermann: Paris, 1965); pp 27-36.

¹⁷ Max Ernst *Beyond Painting and Other Writings by the Artist and his friends* (Wittenborn, Schultz: New York, 1948); p. 14.

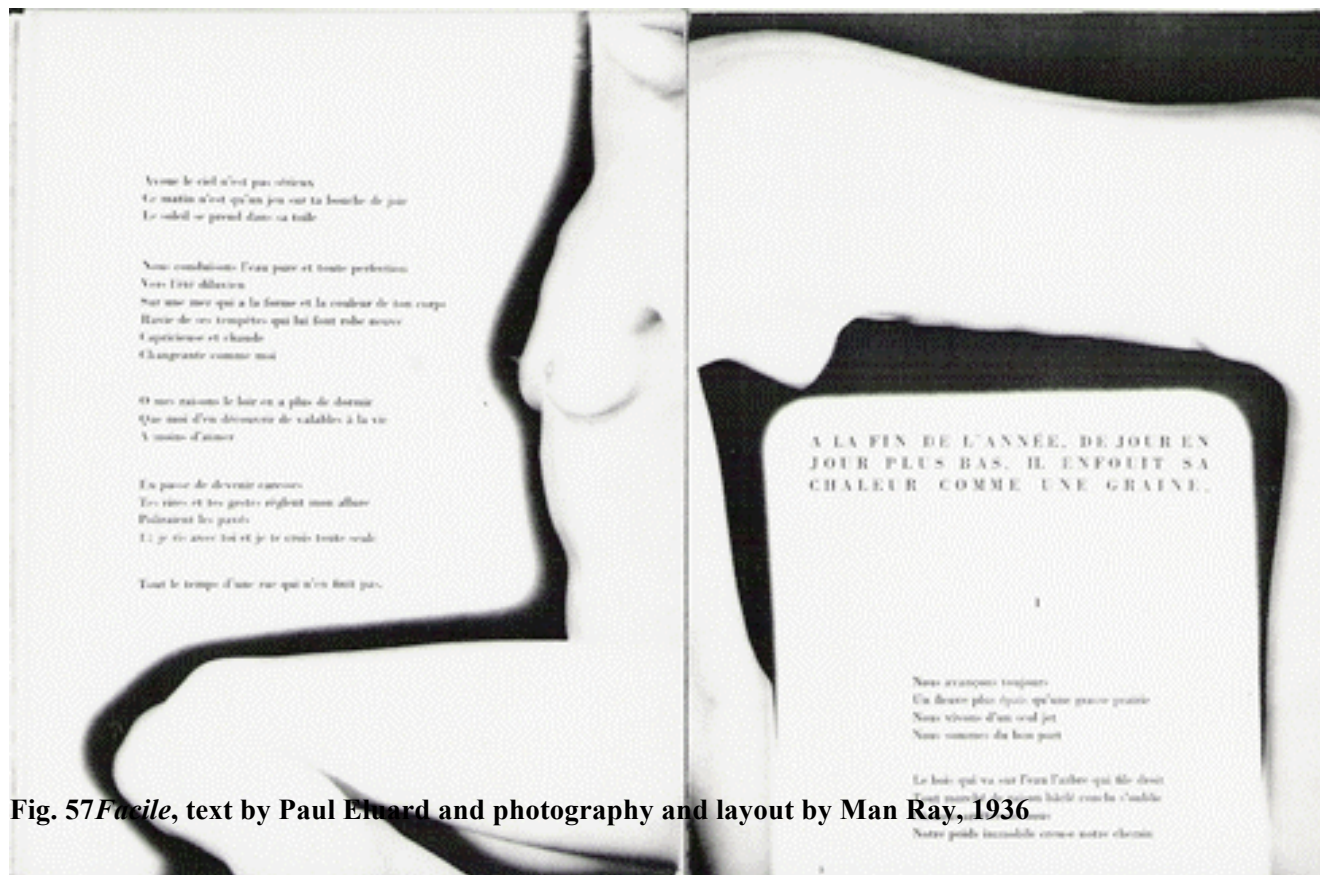


Fig. 57 *Facile*, text by Paul Eluard and photography and layout by Man Ray, 1936

overcome a “certain virginity complex when confronted to the white canvas.”¹⁸ The most diverse techniques seem to vehicle all possible combinations of original material and give free rein to chance and haphazard encounters. This original material, which still offers semantic coherence in montage itself, must undergo dissection on the part of the artist, through his “personality of choice”.¹⁹ As Max Ernst wrote in his autobiography, it is about creating a reality *sui generis* whose very own quality should result from the coupling of diverse realities on an apparently inadequate plane with a “spark of poetry”.²⁰ This “collage principle”²¹ pervades all fifty-six of Ernst’s collages exhibited in Paris at the Galerie Sans Pareil in 1921 under the title “La Mise sous Whisky-marin... au-delà de la peinture” (Beyond painting); as if he had endeavoured to show his new friends the whole array of possibilities he had discovered; unfolding before them a vast number of new avenues to explore, leading to a new art form. Ernst’s pictorial universe stems from the development of new artistic techniques, spanning collage *per se*, frottage of typographic material, touched-up paintings, etc. He nicknamed these works “Fatagaga”, standing for “FABrication de TABLEaux GARantis GAZométriques”.²²

For Ernst, the mechanism of collage did not necessarily involve cutting and pasting. Once, when Ernst told a painter friend that he was working on collages, and was asked what kind of glue he was using, he was “obliged to confess that in most of [his] collages there wasn’t any glue at all.”²³ It was enough to add gouache, ink or pencil to effect a transformation that resulted in a new coupling of realities. The special role of the photograph or photographic fragment is clearly recognised in Ernst’s collages, as Breton said: “He did not use materials aimed at an effect of compensation, as had been the practice hitherto (painted paper for painted canvas, snip of the scissors in place of the brush stroke, the glue itself to imitate smudges) but, on the contrary, elements endowed in their own right with a relatively independent existence – in the same sense that photography can evoke a unique image of a lamp, a bird or an arm.”²⁴ Breton discussed the importance of the systematic isolation on a par with incongruous

¹⁸ Max Ernst in: Hannes Reinhardt (ed.), *Das Selbstportrait* (Wegner: Hamburg, 1967); p. 60.

¹⁹ Louis Aragon, op. cit.; p.53.

²⁰ Aragon, op.cit.; ibidem.

²¹ Werner Spies, *Max Ernst: Collage* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1991); p. 9.

²² “FABrication de TABLEaux GARantis GAZométriques” were collective collages made in Cologne in 1919-1920 by Ernst, Hans Arp and Johannes Baargeld.

²³ Dawn Ades, *Photomontage* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1976); p. 111.

²⁴ André Breton, *Surrealism and painting* (Macdonald and Co.: London, 1972); p. 26.

juxtaposition: “If one were to displace a hand by severing it from an arm, that hand becomes more wonderful as a hand.”²⁵

Frequently, Ernst intensified the poetic power of his collages with long captions or titles. In *The Song of Flesh*, for example, a handwritten text states: “Le chien qui chie le chien bien coiffé malgré les difficultés du terrain causés par une neige abondante la femme à belle gorge la chanson de la chair”; it is a text with no logical or grammatical sequence and it reads like a montage of fragments. In those examples where there is actual collage, images drawn from photographic sources predominate, and Ernst often selected images of objects with a strong or interesting texture.

French Surrealist writers and artists developed various methods associated with the notion of psychic automatism for exploring the mind’s internal processes. They employed strategies such as automatic writing and drawing (spontaneous, uncensored recording of chaotic images that erupted into the unconscious); images generated by free association and dreams; *objets trouvés*; and the unusual or accidental juxtaposition of objects or words. The concept of chance came into play in *decalcomania* – produced by rubbing ink between two pieces of paper – and *frottage* – a technique invented by Max Ernst that consists of rubbing a pencil over paper pressed against a textured object.

The chance encounter embodied the Surrealist strategy of accidental juxtaposition and was often deployed in works for the printed page. Like Max Ernst, the Surrealists explored through their texts and pictorial works the destabilization and splitting of identity, portrayed as a locus of contradiction, fragmentation and decentering. My discussion here will focus essentially on Surrealist photomontage portraits and self-portraits with special reference to Ernst and Breton – although I shall also refer to other visual and verbal modes of production where the principle of visible assemblage is plainly inscribed. The Surrealists liked to photograph one another and also pose in group photographs, and it is therefore only logical that the portrait and self-portrait hold a major part in their photographic production.

The Surrealist (Self-)Portrait

The Dadaists had already parodied the genre of the portrait. Picabia’s 1920 *Portrait of Cézanne*, *Portrait of Rembrandt*, *Portrait of Renoir: Still Lives* consists of a toy monkey stuck onto cardboard; Soupault’s *Portrait d’un imbécile* exhibited at the Salon

²⁵ Breton, op.cit.; ibidem.

Dada in 1921, is an eighteenth-century mirror; while Aragon's contribution to the same Salon was a *Portrait de Jacques Vaché*, made up of cut-out papers and dried leaves. In *Bloomfield-Dada-Chaplinist* from 1921, Blumfield pasted a photograph of his head onto the postcard of a naked female body, in a parodic use of the popular fairground photograph. The term "photomontage" will be used for describing such photomontage and photocollage. Rosalind Krauss does not make the difference between photocollage and photomontage in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, where she describes photomontage as: "a process distinct from combination printing insofar as the term refers, for the most part, to the cutting up and reassembling of already printed material."²⁶ Indeed both techniques are very similar in that they both combine different photographs into a single new image. Photocollage uses cut-out pieces of images glued onto a new image, easily recognised by its irregular surface suggesting three-dimensional perspective; whereas photomontage also describes works where the mechanical combination by scissors and glue are then rephotographed – displaying a smooth surface in two dimensions, emphasizing the flatness of the support. For the purposes of this thesis, no such distinction will be made either. It will be shown that photomontage is a privileged mode of portrayal of Surrealist identity, since, to use Ernst's words regarding his identity, the medium is "*both transparent and enigmatic*" (Ernst's italics)²⁷. Transparent, on the one hand, because of the apparent immediacy of the photographic mode. Enigmatic, on the other, since montage appears as a visibly coded discourse because its elements are juxtaposed and combined to create incongruous realities and thus transforming our vision.

The Surrealists used the model of the formal studio or identity photograph in order to challenge its role in fixing identities by reproducing an external likeness. "The principle of montage", writes Adorno, "was supposed to shock people into realizing just how dubious any organic unity was".²⁸ Hence by manipulating photographic fragments on a single surface, the Surrealists question the principle of the unitary self – instantaneous identity – and expose identity as a construct, a site where conflicts, displacements and decentering of identity are staged. Moreover, we will see that, far from excluding or even transcending the external object, visibility as discussed by

²⁶ Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (The MIT press: Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1999); p. 102.

²⁷ Max Ernst, "Au-delà de la peinture", *Cahiers d'Art*, special Ernst issue, number 6 (1936). In: Max Ernst, *Écritures* (Gallimard: Paris, 1970); in footnoted text on p.42.

²⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (The Athlone Press: New York and London : 1984) ; p.223.

Breton, which aims to explore “pure mental representation”, often stages that object as external. This is achieved through the Surrealists’ choice of visual phenomena taken from the “external world” – notably visual fragments as contingent and apparently meaningless as photographs – and through strategies of *détournement* of these fragments.

Identity staged as a dramatic conflict, identifiable as the reworking – or rather the conscious replay – of the oedipal situation, is present in a large number of Max Ernst’s works. In an early self-portrait of 1920 (Fig. 58), for example, a formal photograph of Ernst is combined with a second, smaller figure made up of the photograph of the bust of a woman pasted ahead from an anatomical engraving. The photograph is inscribed with Ernst’s Dadaist name “Dadamax”, while the *écorché* of the engraving is identified as “Caesar Buonarroti”. The alternative title of this work, *The Punching Ball or the Immortality of Buonarroti*, probably a fatagaga title or inscription given to it by Arp, indicates that this work is both a political parody and a re-enactment of the classic Oedipal scenario. The reduced father-figure is both lawgiver, Caesar, and artistic model, Michelangelo. The figure has been flayed (disfigured), feminised (given a female bust), cut up (castrated), ridiculed (in the grotesque montage of anatomical head and female bust), and reduced to the subordinate role of the donor in a parody of early religious paintings. A political reading foregrounds the caricature of Kaiser Wilhelm, whose discredited rule was the object of many parodies in post-war Germany. In 1920, John Heartfield enacted a similar dramatisation in a self-portrait in which he represents himself with a pair of scissors, in the process of cutting up the effigy of the Berlin Chief of Police. In Ernst’s photomontage, the son occupies the focal point of the composition and the father is displayed on the periphery, as an ungainly artefact, a two-dimensional puppet similar to a fairground effigy – its lower edge overlaps the bottom of the frame – propped up and prevented from toppling over the edge by the son. It is less a human figure than an object, a *cadavre* rather than a *cadavre exquis*. In a parody of the academic self-portrait, the palette and brush of the ideal or real father are replaced by the collage materials of the son’s artistic activity. Ironically these were learned from Ernst senior himself, for Max Ernst’s first lesson in collage is said to have been watching his father paste the head of family members and friends on bodies of saints and angels in copies of old masters.

The visibility of the collage process in *The Punching Ball* is further underscored by the use of various media: photograph, engraving and text. We have already seen that

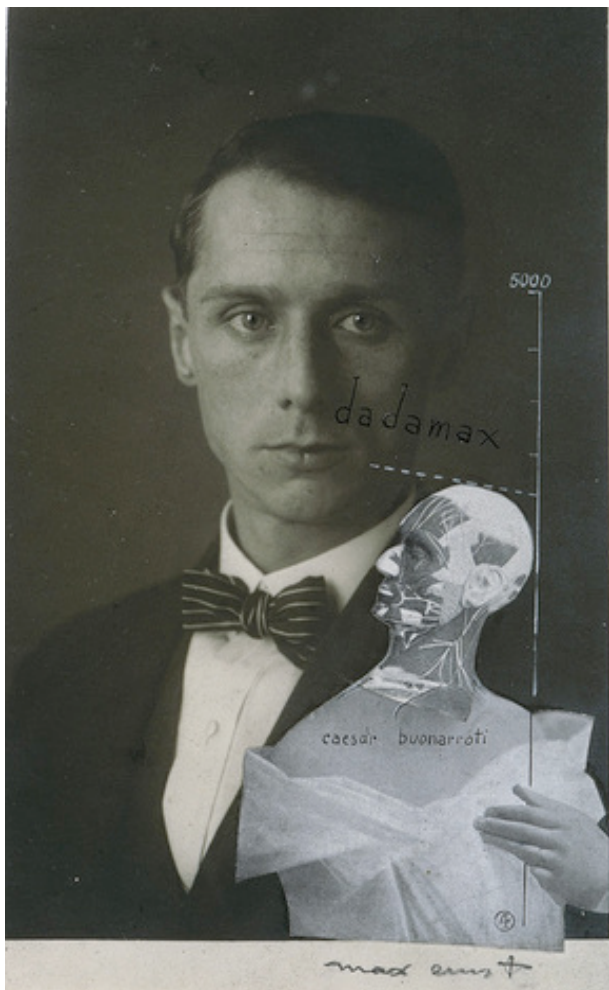


Fig. 58 *The Punching Ball or the Immortality of Buonarroti*, Max Ernst, 1920



Fig. 59 *Au Rendez-vous des amis*, Max Ernst, 1922

the figures are identified by fictitious names. Moreover, to the right of the two figures a measuring line has been drawn, regularly notched and inscribed with the number 5000, held by a disembodied hand. These inscriptions break the mimetic continuum of the photograph by pointing to the image as an artefact, thus further destabilising the role of the photograph as an index of reality. The immediacy of standard photography (the photograph of Ernst), based on its seamlessness, is coupled with the mediated discourse of photomontage, based on a visible juxtaposition of parts, involving fragmentation and hence the presence of seams or spacing, which articulates the sign.²⁹ “For there to be a sign,” writes Roland Barthes in *Camera Obscura*, “there must be a mark; deprived of a principle of marking, photographs are signs which do not *take*” (Barthes’s italics).³⁰ In photomontage the mark is foregrounded, thus articulating a double system of representation, where the immediacy of the photographic element is coupled with the mediacy of the sign – “both transparent and enigmatic”.³¹

The ambivalence of Surrealist portraits, as both presence and sign, can be seen in Max Ernst’s first collective portrait of the Paris group in 1922, *Au rendez-vous des amis* (Fig. 59). Although an oil painting, it is based on the montage principle, visibly assembled from separate fragments which are not perfectly adjusted: there are discrepancies in scale and lighting, and the stiffness of the poses reminds us of the many fairground photographs of the Surrealist group taken around that time, such as those taken at the Montmartre fair where the group poses self-consciously in a cut-out plane or a car. Ernst used individual photographs as a model for each of these portraits; for example, the portrait of Desnos is based on a Montmartre group photograph. As in *The Punching Ball*, the viewer is made aware that he is looking at an artefact: numbers identify the members of the group as in scientific diagrams. Into this painting, Ernst integrated images based on engravings from the science journal *La Nature*. The circular forms in the background above the figures, for example, are derived from an engraving arrangement of the haloes observed around the sun, turned on its side. The still-life arrangement on the lower left is based on yet another engraving known from *La Nature*, a bird’s eye view of an underground fortress. Furthermore, the knife and apple are taken from an illustration of a trick cutting of an apple, itself an allusion to the montage process.³² Although each of the members is realistically depicted and

²⁹ Rosalind Krauss, op.cit.; p.106.

³⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Obscura* (Hill and Wang: New York, 1981); p.6.

³¹ Barthes, op.cit., ibidem.

³² See the analysis of *Au rendez-vous des amis* by Charlotte Stokes, “The Scientific Subjects from *La Nature*”, in *Art Bulletin*, number 62 (September 1980); pp 453-465.

immediately recognisable, their gestures – modelled on the gestures of sign language (Ernst's father was a teacher of deaf-mutes),³³ but also on the jerky movements and stiff poses of the insane (the visual model here being Kraepelin's group photographs of catatonic patients)³⁴ – defy interpretation. Thus, through processes of reification where language is reified as object emptied of its significance, the work challenges the doxa of coded language. In *The Punching Ball*, this reification process takes place in the figure of the father fossilised as a fairground dummy and thus denounces patriarchal authority. At the same time, it points to a new language in the enigmatic gestures and still uncoded signs of the Surrealist group.³⁵

The role of the photographic portrait as a nomadic sign, whose meanings are determined by its various contexts, can be seen in the recycling, and often satirical *détournement*, of such images. For example, the photograph of Breton in the photomontage of the Surrealist group assembled around Magritte's painting of a naked female figure, inscribed with the words: "Je ne vois pas la ... cachée dans la forêt" (published in 1929 in *La révolution surréaliste*), was used in the 1930 pamphlet *Un Cadavre* (itself an appropriation of the Surrealists' 1924 *cadavre* on Anatole France) signed by Georges Ribemont-Desaigues and Georges Bataille, among others. A crown of thorns and drops of blood have been added to the original photograph, producing a satirical comment targeting the leader of Surrealism. In Valentine Hugo's 1934 group portrait of the Surrealists, *Surréalisme*, the head of Breton – the same head that seems to emerge from the waters of the unconscious in Ernst's *Loplop présente le groupe surréaliste* – is repeated three times: once enlarged in the centre, surrounded by the portraits of the Surrealists, and twice in smaller versions, floating on cut-out paper shapes on a dark ground. Hugo appears to elevate Breton's image among the saints, surrounding it with halo-like paper cut-outs as in popular iconography, indicating here a clearly laudatory intention. Such a catalogue of shapes and fragments should be perceived as autonomous; these details are similar to a constantly proliferating *cadavre exquis* or to the part-bodies which inhabit Surrealist works. Far from forming a unitary

³³ Werner Spies, *Die Rückkehr der schönen Gärtnerin. Max Ernst 1950-1970* (DuMont: Cologne, 1971); p.136.

³⁴ Elizabeth Legge, *Max Ernst. The Psychoanalytical Sources* (London, 1989); p. 150.

³⁵ According to Marjorie Warlick, Ernst has portrayed the group as pursuers of ermetic knowledge, under the sign of Mercury, protector of the arts, Crevel represents music, Dostoevsky literature, de Chirico sculpture, and the trick-cut apple geometry and the solar halo astronomy (in: "Max Ernst's Alchemical novel: *Une Semaine de bonté*", *Art Journal*, number 46 (Spring 1987); pp 61-73.

identity or a complete portrait, they are autonomous fragments, a collation of units rather than a finished configuration.

André Breton's own photomontage, *L'Écriture automatique* (1938), can be read as a cross between portrait and theatrical *tableau*. Similar in construction to the stylised tableaux of nineteenth-century melodrama, where the protagonists are portrayed in strikingly exaggerated poses, theatricality is encoded in the same highly artificial poses (Breton in the guise of a scientist alongside his microscope) and facial expressions (the fixed smile of the woman). In melodrama, these momentarily frozen scenes are intended to give a clear visual summary of the narrative situation, the objective being to make sign transparent and thus immediately legible.³⁶ In this photomontage, however, there are no obvious links between the figure of Breton, the female figure behind bars and the microscope on the table. Rosalind Krauss reads this work in the manner of a rebus, both as a *mise-en-scène* of the automatic process where the microscope as a lensed instrument is used as a metaphor for automatic writing, photography of the mind, and as *mise-en-abîme* of writing, where photographic fragments become signs, transforming reality into representation.³⁷ Yet it seems to me that we are looking at objects which resist this reductive reading: Breton's head, disproportionately large in relation to his body, is the head of the scientist-poet actor of a dramatic tableau; but it is also an index of reality, both presence and sign. Like John Berger, I would argue that "the peculiar advantage of photomontage lies in the fact that everything which has been cut out keeps its familiar photographic appearance. We are still looking first at *things* and only afterwards as symbols" (Berger's italics).³⁸

A similar staging of the self is explored in Man Ray's *Self-portrait* (Fig. 60), which appeared as the frontispiece to the Surrealist journal *Minotaure* (December 1933). It consists of a plaster bust, surrounded by several of the artist's works: a hand holding a light bulb, a round prismatic form from which a hand emerges, the photograph of a woman's eyes with artificial tears, entitled *Tears*, and a child's bilboquet. The self, displayed/displaced as a plaster bust, is presented on a plinth among other objects, arranged like stage props. The formal echoes – the round head repeated in the ball,

³⁶ Breton's photomontage of Paul Eluard, *Nourrice des étoiles* (1935) is another example of the portrait as theatrical *mise-en-scène*, based on a rebus; here the pun on the milky way ("la voie lactée"), is humorously encoded in the row of milk bottles above Eluard's head and in his jacket, made from a cut-out from an astronomical chart.

³⁷ Rosalind Krauss, *op.cit.*; pp 102-103.

³⁸ John Berger, *Selected Essays and Articles: The Look of Things* (Bloomsbury: London, 1972); p.185.



Fig. 60 *Self-Portrait*, Man Ray, 1933



Fig. 61 *Paranoiac Metamorphosis of Gala's Face*, Salvador Dali, 1932

light-bulb, tears, bilboquet and eyes – detract from the role of the head as a posing subject and underscore it as an object among others. The eye of the viewer is distracted from the bust, although it is placed at the centre of the composition, onto the objects arranged around it. Self-identity appears displaced in the objects around it or in the artist's works, as in the Loplop photomontage. And whereas *L'Ecriture automatique* enacts the passage from portrait to theatrical tableau, Man Ray's *Self-portrait* is situated between portrait and still life: the portrait becomes a table or stage, where the head, objectified or petrified as a plaster bust, merges with the objects around it, and, through this levelling process, it relinquishes its status as the compositional focus.

Enter the self as other, located between the stage and the table top, mediated through the enigmatic objects of a still-life. In de Chirico's 1913 *Self-portrait* – reputedly the first portrait in Western art not to be a representation of the sitter – disparate elements are arranged on a stage-life construction suspended in space: two plaster feet, an egg, a roll of paper, a proscenium wall where the sign X is inscribed, signalling the absent body, the invisible corpse. Many of Salvador Dali's works, such as his *Paranoiac Metamorphosis of Gala's Face* (Fig. 61) from 1932, are pure artifice, the Arcimboldo principle exploited to excess in arbitrary constructs.³⁹ In the Surrealist quest for a multiple identity, the individual often merges with the anonymous, where the self, as locus of a coherent identity, is displaced or dissolved in the other.

In their exploration of self-identity, the Surrealists experience the double limits of the self, as the multiple other dissolved in anonymity and as the reified self in the mask. This anonymity is enacted in the ambiguities of Max Ernst's *Loplop Presents the Postman Cheval*. An anthropomorphic shape is suggested by the head, the bow-tie, the blue rectangular torso, and the feet. The schematic form is both a figure and an amalgam of various media and objects – grattage, cut-out engraving (the coral shape), line-drawing, photograph, postcards, etc. Postman Cheval is present only by synecdoche in the envelope held by the Loplop figure. The peep-show motif is humorously encoded in the dirty postcard peeping out of the torn see-through envelope, and in the young girl visible through the pee-hole of the torso, none of which seem to refer to Postman Cheval at all.

³⁹ The portraits of Arcimboldo (1527-1593) are made up of composite images related, for example, to a trade or a season. Similar composite images were reproduced in *La Nature* in Gaillot's lithographic series: *Arts et metiers*, where the head is made up of objects relating to a particular trade; see Werner Spies, *Max Ernst - Loplop. The Artist in the Third Person* (George Braziller: London, 1983); p.111.

Such photomontage portraits, by foregrounding the manipulation of images, overtly acknowledge and exploit the portrait genre as a fictional construct. “Thanks to the painter the face remains unseen”, writes Max Ernst.⁴⁰ Far from being the central posing subject the self is constantly displaced in strategies of decentring, doubling or erasing. The Surrealist portrait thus often becomes the site of an uncanny identification of the self with the other. In such deliberately artificial *mises-en scène*, the photographed face itself becomes a mask, as in the photograph of Breton in *Nadja*, or in Duchamp’s transvestite pose as *Rose Sélavy*. In Man Ray’s 1930 portrait of *André Breton* (Fig. 62), Breton, wearing aviator’s goggles, has his face framed by a white paper rectangle, which gives it a mask-like quality, as does Man Ray’s later photomontage of Breton, where the face is pasted onto the Statue of liberty, in yet another parodic use of the popular fairground photograph.⁴¹ Georges Bataille contrasts the harmony of “the open face”, which communicates the stability of the established order, with the mask, which conveys the absence of certainty and the threat of sudden changes.⁴² Projected into an alien context, “the familiar face” is destabilized as a recognisable entity, endangering the order of a stable identity in these photomontages.

It would seem that the search for the self is thus constantly displaced as a search for the other and this no doubt explains why Surrealist writers and artists often elected hybrid creatures as their alter ego: if Loplop Bird Superior has been seen by some critics as the artist’s miniature super-ego,⁴³ cataloguing and framing the artists’ samples, some bestial other marks the surface of the identity – Breton’s soluble fish, Dalí’s soft grasshopper, or Picasso the minotaur – as the outer limits of an *informe* identity. Through these staged hybrid identities, the self is displayed as a convulsive being, in figures articulating both self and other or the other within the self, a process best exemplified by the hermit crab in *Les Champs magnétiques*, which occupies empty shells, thus prompting the question of its identity: “In this simulated hybrid,” writes Philippe Audouin, “who is the I, who is the other?”⁴⁴

Identity is the stranger within, undoing the automaton portrait, the social face. In Latin, *persona* – both person and mask – is linked to the verb *personare*. The Surrealist (self-)portrait is an equivocal space, situated between the melodramatic stage where

⁴⁰ Max Ernst, *Ecritures* (Gallimard: Paris, 1970); p.96.

⁴¹ Cover design for André Breton’s *Young Cherry Trees Secured Against Hares – Jeunes cerisiers garantis contre les lièvres* (University of Michigan Press: New York, 1946).

⁴² Georges Bataille, “Le Masque”, *Œuvres complètes II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1983) ; p.183.

⁴³ Werner Spies, op.cit. (1983); p.80.

⁴⁴ Philippe Audouin, Preface to André Breton’s *Les Champs magnétiques* (Gallimard : Paris, 1983); p.183.

oedipal conflicts are self-consciously enacted, and the still-life table where the face becomes an object among others. In their portraits, the Surrealists often preferred to manipulate the socially coded face by strategies of disjunction and displacement rather than create the irretrievable other. The convulsive identity that Max Ernst constructs from these conflictual selves does not transcend the cracks in the mirror, the oppositions are not resolved in a dialectical flourish, as Breton and Ernst would have it. Surrealist identity is apprehended and articulated as conflict. It remains both contingent and opaque, in Ernst's words "*both transparent and enigmatic*".⁴⁵



Fig. 62 *André Breton, Man Ray, 1930*

⁴⁵ Ernst (1970), op. cit., ibidem.

CHAPTER FOUR: Avant-Garde Film and Montage

The following chapter will make the transition from photography to film. It will look at the relationship between the two media, and more particularly at what the aesthetic implications of montage are in terms of the filmic image. Indeed at the end of the 1910s, German painters, namely Oskar Fischinger, Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling and Walter Ruttmann, worked in parallel to introduce the concept of time into painting and thus developed their own aesthetic framework in relation to film. These artists, Viking Eggeling among them, used the theoretical foundations of music and more particularly the principles of counterpoint to define their own cinematic language. French artists, such as René Clair, Fernand Léger, Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp, also experimented with the filmic medium following the tradition of Abel Gance's research from the 1910s. This discussion will be initiated by an overview of the technological advances that lead to the creation of cinema and the cinematic language of montage.

The cinematic image is recognised as one of the defining elements of twentieth-century culture. Although transient by definition, its pervasive and hypnotic presence has exerted enormous influence on modern imagination and on the arts. Early examples of such an influence drew inspiration from the animation devices and techniques of the 1820s and 1830s that mark the humble beginnings of cinema's evolution. Czech artist Joseph Vachal's 1919 flip books originated from the Thaumatrope – a popular nineteenth-century novelty made of a simple disc of card with images on both sides which was spun using twisted cords attached to opposite edges – which created the illusion of movement by alternating two images simultaneously at high speed. Marcel Duchamp's *Rotary Demisphere (Precision Optics)*, a motorised construction produced in 1925, and his film *Anemic Cinema* (1925), both draw on a similar device called the Phenakistoscope.¹

The relationship between cinema and other art forms, however, is not a one-sided affair. From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, connections and interchanges have taken place. For instance, the revolutionary typography of Mallarmé's poem "Jamais un coup de dé n'abolira le hasard" (1897) – published just two years after the invention of cinema was patented by the Lumière brothers in Paris – anticipated later cinematic techniques such as the alternation of shots of different scales. Mallarmé leads the reader through the poetic space of the page, emphasizing

¹ This optical device was invented by the Belgian physicist, Joseph Plateau, in 1832, and consisted of a disc with slots cut into its edge. When rotated, images on one side could be viewed with the aid of a mirror. The resulting stroboscopic images gave the illusion of movement.

themes and ideas by employing typefaces that change from large to small in much the same way that filmmakers lead the viewer through space by alternating close-ups, medium shots and long shots.

Like Mallarmé's poetry, Cubist paintings also had affinities with the cinematic page with their changing scale, juxtaposed and superimposed planes, and the position of subjects in space. Both Cubist painters and their contemporary filmmakers endowed space with new meaning and stimulated the viewer's participation by constructing narratives through the changing positions and points of view of their characters.

It is therefore not surprising that writers close to Cubism, such as Blaise Cendrars in Paris and Karel Capek in Prague, were spellbound by cinema and incorporated elements of the new medium in their writings. A proponent of Cubism, Capek published the first analysis of cinematic editing in 1913. In it he demonstrated that film replaced the static position and ideal distance of the viewer in the theatre with dynamic, multiple points of view that constantly change the viewer's distance from the action.² Other artists influenced by Cubism, such as Fernand Léger and Sonia Delaunay, created a distinctly cinematic quality in their work which they often produced in collaboration with writers. *La Prose du Transsibérien* (1913), a book by Cendrars and Delaunay, employed a vertical format suggesting the form of a filmstrip. Delaunay's stencil designs showed a remarkable similarity to a series of drawings entitled *Le Rythme coloré* (1913) by her contemporary Léopold Survage. Survage's abstract colour forms drawn in inks on paper were produced as designs for an animated abstract film supported by Cendrars and Apollinaire that was never produced.³ Survage aimed at producing painting in motion and conceived his film as a series of separate sequences, each one representing abstract forms in movement including: the transfiguration of one form in another, the integration and disintegration of form, movements towards and away from the camera, and colour changes. Survage defined his intentions as follows: "*Colored Rhythm* is in no way an illustration or an interpretation of a musical work. It is an art in itself, even if it is based on the same psychological facts as music".⁴ Through the analogy with music, Survage regarded his film as an exercise in rhythm, not one in movement. This rhythmical relationship

² Karel Capek originally published his text entitled "Styl kinematografu", in *Styl*, volume 5, number 5 (1913); pp 146-148. This interpretation was found in Jaroslav Andel, *Avant-Garde Page Design 1900-1950* (Delano Greenidge Editions: New York, 2002); p. 285.

³ Standish Lawder, *The Cubist Cinema* (New York University Press: New York, 1975); pp 21-26.

⁴ This text was published by Apollinaire in the last issue of *Les Soirées de Paris*. This English translation comes from Standish Lawder's book on Cubist painting, op. cit.; p.22.

between music and film also inspired many avant-garde filmmakers – for example, Abel Gance, Germaine Dulac and Henri Chomette in France; and Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling and Walter Ruttmann in Germany.

The book *La Fin du monde filmée par l'ange de Notre-Dame* (1919), collaboration between Blaise Cendrars and Fernand Léger, was inspired by American slapstick comedy and written in the manner of a film script – a device in vogue among the avant-garde writers of the time.⁵ Léger suggested movement through the multiplication of forms in changing scales; he also used lettering and numerals in a uniquely cinematic style – elements that later reappeared in his film *Ballet mécanique* of 1924.

By the 1920s, cinema had become one of the main sources of inspiration for avant-garde artists, some of whom – namely Francis Picabia, Man Ray, Walter Ruttmann, Marcel Duchamp, Hans Richter – also made films. Almost immediately, the filmstrip became an obsessively quoted image appearing in many different variations in photography, page design and literature. For example, Jean Epstein's book *Cinéma* (1920), whose first and last pages consist of a filmstrip image with the captions “Bon jour” and “Bon soir” effectively suggested the transformation of the printed page into a projection screen. Another example would be the magazine *G* published by Hans Richter, who devoted a special issue to cinema featuring a photogramme by Man Ray in the image of a filmstrip on the cover. This image was also reprinted inside the magazine with the caption *Die neue Landschaft* [The New Landscape].

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's book, *Malerei Fotografie Film* (1925), with its use of actual filmstrips as well as its visual presentation of the author's script for “Dynamik der Gross Stadt” [Dynamics of the Big City], suggests the reasons for the filmstrip's popularity with avant-garde artists. The filmstrip is a flat surface – which made it compatible with the printed page, the painting, the photograph – while at the same time conjuring up depth and movement within its frames. In the eyes of the avant-garde, the film strip became an emblem of both cinema's expressive power and the process of dematerialisation that characterised developments in the new media of the day.

As we saw earlier, photomonteurs also grafted cinematic devices to their works. Rodchenko's photomontage covers for a series entitled *Mess Mend ili lanki v Petrograde* [Mess Mend or a Yankee in Petrograd, 1924] (Fig. 63) evoked the fast

⁵ *Das Kinobuch*, an anthology of film scripts by prominent writers, appeared in Leipzig as early as 1913. Edited by Kurt Pinthus, the publication heralded a new literary form that became popular with avant-garde artists after the First World War.



Fig. 63 Photomontage Covers for Shaginian's *Mess Mend*, Alexander Rodchenko, 1924



Fig. 64 Cover for Delluc's *Filmova Dramata*, Karel Teige, 1926

pace of silent movies through the dynamic juxtaposition of cut-outs from film stills. Karel Teige's cover for Louis Delluc's *Filmova dramata* [Screenplays, 1926] (Fig. 64) combines a close-up of an actress's eyes juxtaposed on a close-up of her face – an image that alludes to cinematic montage. Other techniques inspired by the technique of montage, such as multiple exposures, juxtapositions and over-printing, abounded. An extreme example, drawing on images of film strips (mostly from slapstick comedy and documentaries), movie cameras and projectors, as well as on the formal devices mentioned above, is the series of ten monographs produced by Piet Zwart between 1931 and 1933 (Fig. 65). Through his various pieces, Zwart aptly summarised the cinematic and photographic concepts that influenced the avant-garde during the 1920s and the 1930s, epitomised by the use of montage as structuring principle.

Photography versus Film

Given the strong historical connections between film and photography, it is indeed surprising that a thorough theoretical discussion of the relationship between these two media has yet to occur. Just what draws a photographer to experiment with the filmic medium, when he or she has found success in still photography? In what way are these media formally similar? In what ways are they different? How is audience/viewer reception structured by the characteristics of each medium? In order to explore these questions, the next sections will focus on the theory of montage as used in the avant-garde films of the 1920s and 1930s. Since the advent of montage as structuring principle, theorists and aestheticians have continued to formulate ideas and concepts concerning the nature of montage, at times touching on its relationship to still photography and cinema. With time, the parameters of debate have been redrawn, the postulates reformulated, thereby revising our understanding of the uses and pleasures of film and photography. Yet there seems to have been little consensus, and no sustained critical debate.

Surveying film theory, it becomes apparent that few film theorists have overtly addressed the relationship between film and photography. For early theorists, such as Béla Balázs or Rudolf Arnheim in the 1920s, the question of photography in relation to film seemed immaterial, because their primary theoretical objective was to promote the cinema as an independent and culturally respectable art form, separate from theatre, literature, and photography (which also suffered from cultural negligence). Likewise, some of the Soviet theoreticians of the 1920s, including Lev Kuleshov and Vsevolod



Fig. 65 Book Cover for a series of ten monographs, Piet Zwart, 1931-33

Pudovkin, posited the montage of individual shots as the defining element of cinema as an art form. Their interest in composition within the film frame, as the most basic element of film form, went no further than to postulate formal criteria for the single individual image.

The classical film theories of André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer posit an inherent structural connection between photography and film. Indeed, the ontological similarity between the two media is central to their argument that these media are realistic art forms with deep phenomenological connections to the real world, thus separating them from other art forms, such as painting, music, or literature, which have no such relationship to reality. Both critics theorised photography as a photochemical process that captures light and fixes it on paper, thereby rendering a visual impression of reality. Photography is perceived as being capable of pulling a moment in time out of an unstructured reality, of creating the impression of three-dimensional space. The object depicted, the reality behind the image, the real world seen through vision, documented through chemistry, is what moves human emotion. By extension, film is seen as merely moving photography, where light is documented on a piece of celluloid in time, as well as in space. The frame of the film image functions similarly to the edges of the photographic image, except that the film image can look beyond the edge of the frame, like a human observer sticking his head out of the frame of a window. As Kracauer writes in his introduction to *The Theory of Film*, “Film is essentially an extension of photography, and therefore shares with this medium a marked affinity for the visible world around us. Films come into their own when they record and reveal physical reality.”⁶

As realist theoreticians both Bazin and Kracauer viewed the primary function of the photographic medium to be the reproduction of reality in all its complexity and ambiguity. Since both film theorists also interpret the history of painting from its beginnings to the late nineteenth century – when it is relieved of its reproductive duties by photography and film – as a progressive movement towards the re-creation of reality, it is not surprising that they value film realism as the highest form of art. Bazin writes:

The guiding myth, then, inspiring the invention of cinema, is the accomplishment of that which dominated in a more or less vague fashion all the techniques of mechanical reproduction of reality in the nineteenth century, from photography to the phonograph, namely an integral realism, a

⁶ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Theory of Film. The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1997); p.37.

recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time.⁷

Bazin and Kracauer have been classified as transcendental phenomenologists since they identify the photographic object as synonymous with consciousness, with the essence of vision. According to Vivian Sobchack, transcendental phenomenology describes “only the irreducible ground, the essential structure, the static “sameness” of consciousness – much as a still photograph describes the irreducible field of its vision, its invariant relations, the immutable “sameness” of its gaze.”⁸ In other words, there is a false assumption that photographic media actually reproduce the world as it exists, that is, as it supposedly exists in its totality, as a unified whole without the intervention of human consciousness. The dynamism of reality and the constantly shifting perception of reality through human consciousness are somehow lost in the process. Furthermore, the technical characteristics of film and photography simultaneously tie them to and distance them from the reproduction of reality, since the technology must be guided by a human eye, brain, and hand.

Clearly then, both theorists contribute to an understanding of how film and photography are similar – they both create images that reproduce an approximation of the human perception of the world – and offer a possible explanation of why photographers would be drawn to the related medium of film, but they fail to account for differences between the media. Generations of photographers, maybe even more than filmmakers, have thrived on their ability “to see” images in the real world, and then capture them on a photographic negative. Film has the possibility of increasing this reality quotient and thus provides a challenge for those photographers interested in pursuing such an aesthetic. Bazin and Kracauer do not clarify the exact attraction the cinema has had for photographers, if only because their discussion of photography is merely a starting point for their subsequent film theoretical deliberations.

While Bazin and Kracauer see film as an advance over photography, and both media as an aesthetic advance over painting, another phenomenological theorist, Stanley Cavell, has analysed the photograph’s specific accomplishment in relation to film. Cavell notes that a photograph shuts out the world, revealing within a frame only that which the camera has chosen to expose, while forever denying access to the space

⁷ André Bazin, “The Myth of Total Cinema”, in: André Bazin, *What is Cinema*, volume 1 (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1967); p.22.

⁸ Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1992); p.58.

beyond the frame.⁹ In doing so, the photographer freezes a moment, not only in time, but also in space, transforming three-dimensions into a two-dimensional image. More importantly, a photograph can create a self-enclosed and self-sufficient world that needs no other referent, other than itself. Both time and space are fixed, allowing for the production of a unified point of view.¹⁰

A motion picture, on the other hand, continually peers beyond the horizontal and vertical borders of the photographic image; indeed, it revels in its own possibilities of movement, in continually discovering the *terra incognita* beyond the limited vision of the immediate frame. Discovering that other space can be accomplished a number of ways: through camera movement, through montage, through lighting. A film camera can pan to the left or right, move forward into an image or away from the object depicted. Through a shot/reverse-shot construction, the filmmaker can simply turn the camera around, exposing what was previously behind the camera, what was invisible. By changing lighting patterns, the filmmaker can reveal things previously hidden by the shadows. This, according to Cavell, shows cinema is more than just a frame or window onto the world; it is indeed a multidimensional construction of special and temporal relationships that have the ability to create a seamless vision of the world or fragment that vision into a multitude of viewpoints.

An important ontological difference between the two media, which also influences the work of the photographer/filmmaker, is, therefore, the relative “openness” of the film image versus the insularity of the photograph. As Roland Barthes has noted: “The Photograph is *flat*, platitudinous in the true sense of the word, that is what I must acknowledge.”¹¹ Films, on the other hand, allow for an open-ended structure, both within the image and through time. The objects depicted within the film image may lose their specificity of meaning, because they are subject to change as the images move. This formal difference between film and photography is crucial, because it points toward another phenomenological characteristic of film in relation to photography, which has been explored by the phenomenologist Gilles Deleuze – namely the element of time. While photography expands a split second into eternity, freezing the moment forever, film functions in time and can only be perceived through time. It may speed up time through stop-motion cinematography. It may slow it down through slow motion, but it can only exist in time, because it is constructed on a

⁹ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1979); pp 23-25.

¹⁰ Cavell, op. cit.; pp 30-31.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (Vintage: London, 2000); p.106.

temporally-based illusion of perception. Moving images on a screen are more than an illusion of space and time, that is, they are more than an image to which movement has been added. Rather, in the words of Deleuze, they are “a movement-image”.¹² In opposition to photography, where the single image retains its materiality, the sequencing of separate photographic images in the cinema renders them individually invisible through the process of projection. In other words, the film image is rendered in the act of perception as light and shadow, rather than in concrete material form.

Montage: A Simple Cut?

If there is one component of cinema which can simultaneously account for the artificiality and the conspicuousness of the medium, it truly is montage. The technique of putting strips of celluloid together, of placing heterogeneous spaces side by side, while appearing so natural to our contemporary gaze and conscience, is in effect a complex mode of representation which viewers had to grow accustomed to. Montage had to impose itself gradually, change our habits as viewers and play with increasingly elaborate conventions. Such a statement is rendered explicit by the ease with which current-day viewers accept the fast succession of images, superimpositions and rhythm of sequences present on television, for instance. The evolution of the spectator's gaze vis-à-vis such forms of montage only bear testimony to how these forms and techniques are linked to their cultural context, to their medium, to their modes of representation whose diversity and efficiency largely overcome our understanding.

It has often been said that the twentieth century was the century of the image; it may be more pertinent to state that it was the century of associating images. Cartoons, television, cinema have imposed a fragmented and shattered view of the world: a representation calling on rupture as much as on continuity, on association as much as on unity. Contemporary culture stems from montage – and through this technique, cinema.

In order to proceed with an analysis of montage in avant-garde film, I feel it is necessary to define the term more precisely and as a consequence define the conceptual operation it represents. In the English language, the word *cutting* is used to describe the practical and material action of cutting and assembling pieces of celluloid – or more

¹² In his book entitled “The Movement Image”, Deleuze states that the “Cinema does not give us an image to which movement is added, it immediately gives us a movement-image. It does give us a section, but a section which is mobile, not an immobile section + movement.” In: Gilles Deleuze, *The Movement-Image* (Continuum International Publishing Group: London, 2001); p.2.

recently, to manipulate the cursor of the computer in order to virtually assemble shots and scenes and select those that can be discarded – and the word *editing* is the general notion of constructing the narrative order of a film, of choosing the complete montage of the film.

Cutting is a technical operation, but its importance is far from negligible. The exact rhythm of the film, the projection of shots, its fluidity, its internal dynamism all partly emanate from the choices made by the cutter. Within a given aesthetic system – whether it is telling a story, describing a process, or merely contemplating – there exists a craftsmanship of montage which corresponds to cutting at the right time, to cheating with continuity, to finding movement, to finding the frame which allows the best possible assembly. Through the repeated screenings of successive shots, the editor carries out a manual operation which consists of cutting and gluing to find the appropriate articulation (up until video editing appeared, of course).

In mainstream cinema, the intervention of the *cutter* – we could call him the montage craftsman or the *monteur* – concerns fluidity and the smooth articulation of shots, but not the global architecture of a film. Although this intervention remains limited to making connections, its impact on the aesthetic impression the film makes on the viewer is far from being benign. The *monteur*'s intervention contaminates dramaturgy and the very essence of the story.

In a scenario the presentation of actions follows a certain order which is “literary” in essence; it is comparable to the sequencing of the storyteller, or the novelist, when they set out their narrative. More specifically related to the characteristics of a film, there can also be an order for presenting elements of a story inherent to the dramaturgy of images. The manner in which to mark out sequencing, not the manner in which to describe action: choosing a close-up, a camera movement to accompany a specific gesture, a reverse shot in an empty room, etc. They represent cinematographic choices, indissociable from the resulting image. Through such choices, which can only be understood with respect to continuity, genuine filmic writing can be initiated through which the viewer is guided as he would be by the syntax of a sentence. This way of composing sequences, usually described as “montage”, could appropriately be termed “*découpage*” since it intervenes *de facto* before shooting the film (where shooting can be seen as carrying out an already defined project) and mainly stems from an internal principle of articulation of reality described, and not from a principle of fragmentation/association. Pier Paolo Pasolini spoke of the “written language of

reality”, thus highlighting the entanglement of the evidences and choices to which the filmic medium is submitted in its representation.

As early as 1920, a particularly perspicacious Soviet filmmaker, Lev Kuleshov, realised that such a distinction was at play in the films shot at the time, and that Americans in particular used the method of “*découpage*”:

By looking to reduce the length of every component of film, the length of each fragment taken separately and filmed from the same place, Americans found the way to solve complex scenes by only filming the instant of the movement which is indispensable to the action, and the camera is placed in such a way that the spectator apprehends and perceives the meaning of the movement in question as clearly and simply as possible. Let us use an example for purposes of clarity. For example, an actor opens the drawer of a desk, finds a gun and thinks about killing himself. If the scene is shot in such a way that the desk, the entire room and the actor could be seen on the screen, but that the scene’s centrality lies in opening the drawer, the gun and the actor’s face, we would cut the scene according to the moments that compose it: 1) the hand opens the drawer, 2) the gun, 3) the face of the actor, we could show each instant full-scale on the screen, which would be directly perceived by the spectator – since his gaze will not be constantly distracted by something useless in the image.

We will thus see that in American film, the number of components is multiplied by the shooting method which decomposes each scene into a series of elements.¹³

Although the term “*découpage*” is not yet present – Kuleshov refers to this concept when he uses the expression “montage of American shots” – he clearly defines its principle here, by opposing it to Soviet practice (and generally, European practice during the 1910s) which consists of mainly using general shots and thus allow the viewer to choose the trajectory of the gaze. Kuleshov mostly describes the preparation, the *a priori* of the story, and more importantly, of the gaze.

Despite all the temporal and functional overlaps between the stages of preparation and editing, despite the apparent similarities of the *découpage* made before and after shooting a film, it is necessary to be aware of the absolute opposition which exists between both operations. *Découpage* presupposes that the author and the viewer share the same representation of the world, the same “background” on which the fragments of the action become comprehensible and which contribute to situate the film. For everyone to understand the plot, the reactions of the characters and the context in a few indications, in a few allusions, these representations must be common to all, they must belong to a common vision.

¹³ My translation of “La bannière du cinématographe” written in 1920, in François Albéra, Ekaterina Khokhlova and Valerie Pesener, *Koulechov et les siens* (Editions du Festival de Locarno: Locarno, 1990).

The cinema of *découpage* is somewhat metonymic: it only offers fragments to the viewer, so that he can immediately refer to the suggested totality. This can only be rendered possible if evident relations and close links exist between each fragment, and with respect to the whole film. The idea of continuity thus seems indispensable to the principle of *découpage*: the chronological continuity between successive shots, as well as continuity of logic between close-ups and long shots, between the different parts of the action which are presented separately. The manner in which shots are composed, filmed and how they are connected call for continuity, a unity of perception which determines an aesthetic whole. The classical Hollywood cinema, which constituted the paramount system of representation from the 1920s to the 1950s, rests on this model. An *ex ante* ideal unity is fragmented, from spectacular and scattered parts, so that the viewer is able to recompose a similar whole.

If *découpage passim* organises cinematographic images, before the film is actually shot, what then should we call “montage”?

The Aesthetic Implications of Using Collage in Film

So far, we have seen that montage is an “application” of *découpage*, it constitutes the fulfilment of an approach founded on the principles of fragmentation and reconstitution. When a *cinema of montage* is called into question, when reference is made to *monteur-filmmakers*, the principle is fundamentally different. Sergei Eisenstein, Orson Welles, Alain Resnais or Jean-Luc Godard all used montage in radically different approaches.

In the well-known sequences of *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *October* (1927) or *Alexander Nevski* (1938), the images clash, collide, and echo one another without offering a clear journey for the unified gaze. In their succession, shots do not construct continuity, rather they provoke a series of jumps which, far from aiding the logical flow of the gaze – as is the case in the example developed by Kuleshov – leave the viewer somehow probing. The contrasts between the long shots and the close-ups of faces in the Odessa Steps sequence of *Battleship Potemkin* cause the tangible emotion of chaos in perception. These images neither cut up the space of the plot nor the time of the action: often, they are not exactly related to the same place or even the same moment – one cannot distinguish the scenes detailed by medium close-ups in the long shots. There is no realistic arrangement in the succession of these shots: the arrangement is demonstrative. The “structure” of the event is shown, rather than the event itself.

In Robert Flaherty's documentary poem, *Man of Aran* (1934), a similar use of the disjointed repetition of a gesture removes any anecdotal and functional character it may have in order to become a sort of essential movement. A few brief images show an Aran fisherman crushing stones by lifting a heavy sledge hammer above his head which he then drops. This gesture is repeated in jerks, not by the fisherman, but through the use of montage, thus endowing it with a completely different strength – as a sculptor would use plastic means to show the essence of a gesture, and not merely its occurrence.

Montage associates shots whose temporal coherence or logic is not manifest. In a same locus, two characters can be represented, through jerks, flashes as if through a stroboscope in a manner which in no way recomposes continuity. The succession of these shots is not borne out of a preconditioned *découpage*; they are a collage of instants, gestures, attitudes and situations whose links are hypothetical, subterranean, revealed rather than acknowledged. Here, a sort of suspension – a presentation out of time and out of the action – substitutes itself for realistic sequencing. Continuity is no longer a necessity for this manifest collage, contrary to the operation of *découpage*. It is no longer about respecting an order, whether logical or chronological, which the viewer can easily recognise. On the contrary, it is about provoking relations, to cause correspondences, whose unpredictability is primordial. The *monteur* then, is not bound by any necessity imposed by a system of references external to the image: he can thus provoke, within this image, a number of new echoes.

Montage, practised as collage, employs surprise and chance in the manner of the collages of the Surrealist painters or those of Braque and Picasso, associating different materials and unexpected figures in order to provoke novel forms and passionate encounters.

Montage seems to obey two logical processes, which may converge or diverge: that of *découpage* and that of *collage*. In numerous contemporary film productions, both processes can be used; *découpage* is mostly used for the general arrangement of large narrative structures, and collage for the internal arrangement of certain sequences. John Cassavetes, for example, practices such a double arrangement of this filmic material to great effect in *Faces* (1968) where sequences are ordered according to the tight chronology of a single night, and within each sequence the rhythm of moments, the laughter, the silence, and the reiterated and composed rupture of the physical and affective links which preside over the forms of montage. In a completely different style, the films of Takeshi Kitano, in *Hana-Bi* (1998) for example, are organised

around a global narrative project, on the one hand, which evidently calls for *découpage* – the evolution on the plot, the succession of clues in the discovery of the characters, etc. – and the use of montage within sequences on the other hand to play with flashes, jerks, unrealistic jumps which drive the film towards another representation of logic.

The logic behind the process of *découpage* can be seen as one of the most characteristic aspects of classical cinema. It preserves unity and continuity in a tight network of markers which form the rigid canvas on which the world is represented. This logic is immediately recognisable and understandable and comforts the arrangement of the world as it is perceived by everyone. The principle of *découpage* proposes a journey – for the conscience as well as for the gaze – on a specific backdrop and according to modalities which are common to all. This does not entail the exclusion of drama or suspense: Alfred Hitchcock, for example, situates the filmic journey in such a conformist global context, although the effects he produces are far from conventional. *Découpage* is evidently a complex tool that, when mastered skilfully and effectively, belongs to the great creators. This is one of the beauties of the classical form: although the form used is not novel, the most subtle variations nonetheless become infinitely possible.

Conversely, when the intention is to modify perception – and not how the events are perceived *per se* – when montage is used to juxtapose sounds or images which are not habitually associated, the principle of collage questions representation itself. Montage as used by Dziga Vertov, Jean-Luc Godard or even Stan Brakhage unravels such a conventional canvas and reassembles it ostensibly, while shedding light on the fragility and artificiality of the framework on which it rests. This collage, in its very principle, unveils the arbitrariness of the solutions which “impose themselves” and are passed off as a necessity. It is thus not surprising that montage, here encompassing both *découpage* and collage, is one of the major tools of modern cinema – one which portrays a representation of the world which questions traditional models.

Montage, then, is an operation that will always oscillate between two poles and balance its influences in a singular manner, different in each film, and thus composed of these two conceptions, although both are radically different. Montage-*découpage* and montage-collage serve the same art form, or at least the same field of expression. They articulate sound and image according to certain projects to which either a logic of continuity or a logic of rupture can participate. Thus, they contribute to telling stories (narrative montage), to establishing relations of meaning (discursive montage), and to provoking emotions albeit in a punctual manner (montage of correspondences).

The types of montage we will be concerned with here are discursive montage and the montage of correspondences. Both forms maintain the principle that shots constitute an entity and are assembled according to an exterior logic. The *découpage* of an already constituted unity is thus replaced by notions of graft and collage, which clearly mark the secondary nature of assembly with regards to the consideration of every element. Such definitions do have an absolute character, they must nonetheless not be perceived as definite. Each film is composed of different types of montage, sometimes associating collage to graft, or graft to *découpage*. No film is solely made up of one of these processes: they only represent the dominant characteristic, whose balance changes from one film to the next, sometimes from one sequence to the next. The dominant forms present in avant-garde film are, of course, those which upset the viewer's traditional habits and force him into new relations. The first avant-garde films used a montage of correspondences in order to evoke feelings from the viewers, thus shunning any narrative or figurative intent. As we shall see, such developments were borne out of a close relationship with other art forms, namely painting and music.

Cinema, Music and Painting

Like painting [...] – and more completely than painting, since a living rhythm and its repetition in time are what characterize cineplastics – the later art tends and will tend more everyday to approach music and the [sic] dance as well. The interpenetration, the crossing, and the associations of movements and cadences already give us the impression that even the most mediocre films unroll in musical space.¹⁴

The filmic avant-garde took shape when certain painters started to show an intense interest in the cinema from around 1910. They were attracted both by its dynamism – here, finally, was an art of *moving* pictures – and by its potential for creating different visions and realities. Picasso, for instance, considered working with film in about 1912. Even earlier, Kandinsky had considered filming his collaboration with Arnold Schoenberg on the opera *Die Glückliche Hand* [The Lucky Hand].

The idea of bringing together painting and cinema, to achieve a new synthesis embodying the spirit of modern culture, was first explored in practical terms by the Futurists in Italy and Russia. An iconoclastic celebration of the modern age, Futurism rejected the styles and subjects of the past and embraced the new century's forms of speed, violence and power. Modern life, to the doctrine's adherents, was a thrilling aesthetic event, and war was its ultimate expression. For the acknowledged leader of

¹⁴ Elie Fauré, "The Art of Cineplastics" in Richard Abel, *French Film History and Criticism. A History / Anthology 1907-1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1993); p.260

the group, Filippo Marinetti, the cinema held many exciting possibilities. The achievements of the Italian Futurists as filmmakers were nonetheless limited, and the loss of most Futurist-inspired films, including their abstract hand-painted colour work, means that critical prominence has been accorded to the later avant-garde work from Germany and France.

Soon after, German painters also began to experiment with the graphic potential of film. Abstract film was borne out of an interest in exploring how simple abstract shapes could be juxtaposed on canvas to create visual harmonies and rhythms which were directly analogous to music. Technological advances provided artists with the opportunity to create and mould parameters of image and sound in imagined and unimagined ways: a new type of hybrid artist working across media and technologies emerged. Walter Ruttmann foresaw this in 1919 when he remarked that technological progress would lead to the acceleration of the transfer of information between sound and image, leading to a “constant state of being swamped with material” and thereby to an altered state of perception. As a result of this, a “new, hitherto latent type of artist would emerge, approximately half-way between painting and music”.¹⁵ This is very much the case today: musicians and music composers can craft visual music compositions either with or for music, and artists and filmmakers can craft original music and soundtracks for their visual compositions.

Painting According to the Language of Music

What are the visual characteristics available to the visual artist that are akin to the musical characteristics available to the music composer? They are the broad strokes and considerations of musical tradition, style, time, structure, form, space, rhythm, duration, relations, harmony and Gestalt. They are also the more specific strokes such as orchestration, phrasing, line, colour, contrast, shape, pattern, repetition, consonance, dissonance, tone and dynamics. Added to this are the artistic styles and intentions of the artist, where there is a consideration for the expression of concepts, ideas and emotions. The result is a temporal visual artwork that exists in time and whose constituent elements evolve over time just as music elements evolve and exist over time. Some broad categories from which to examine visual music compositions are aspects of the language, grammar and syntax of music composition that are used in a

¹⁵ Dieter Daniels quoting Walter Ruttmann in “Art and Media in the XX. Century”, Martin-Gropius-Bau Berlin, *The Age of Modernism – Art in the 20th Century*, catalogue for the exhibition (Hatje Verlag: Stuttgart, 1997); pp 553-564.

similar manner, and are shared in the visual domain or both. Artists and filmmakers seek their own connections between music and sound and use these parameters and characteristics of sound in different ways.

This section will attempt to draw a path through historical works that connect images and sounds with a view to bringing forward some of these connections. Notwithstanding the difference between the visual and sound media, film composition – seen as craft or creation – strongly resembles music composition. Each visual music artist has an idea and approach to working with his or her chosen visual material. The visual material is pliable and formless; it can be taken from many sources, just as contemporary music takes its sound material from many sources and shapes it in many different ways. What is most striking about visual music works, however, is that in order to put some shape onto this visual material, the focus has been on using concepts from music, focusing on structure and language, yet reworking these concepts for a visual production. One of the common properties between music and moving images is the property of motion. All the artists and works discussed here have considered motion in their work to a point where the essence of visual music becomes this composition of motion. A new grammar was created for a new art form, which the early pioneers of music and visual art, particularly those who worked with film, had envisioned and sought in their works.

The form and language of music composition were used by certain painters, often in a metaphorical manner. They also initiated a novel visual language that helped artists construct images that focussed on creating visual forms and translating concepts and structures from music into concepts and structures of the visual. The resulting imagery is often non-narrative, non-representational and abstract, bringing imagery into a similar position to music. The non-representational nature of music and its emotional expression is mirrored in the non-representational nature of the resulting imagery that also appealed to emotions. By exploring the visual with musical thought, artists created new visual forms, new patterns and new relationships between visual elements.

Principles of Counterpoint: Orchestration of Movement and Orchestration of Time

Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter researched and experimented with the aesthetics of the visual and explored new principles, technical devices and techniques through their art to create non-representational works. One of their ideas was to explore the many

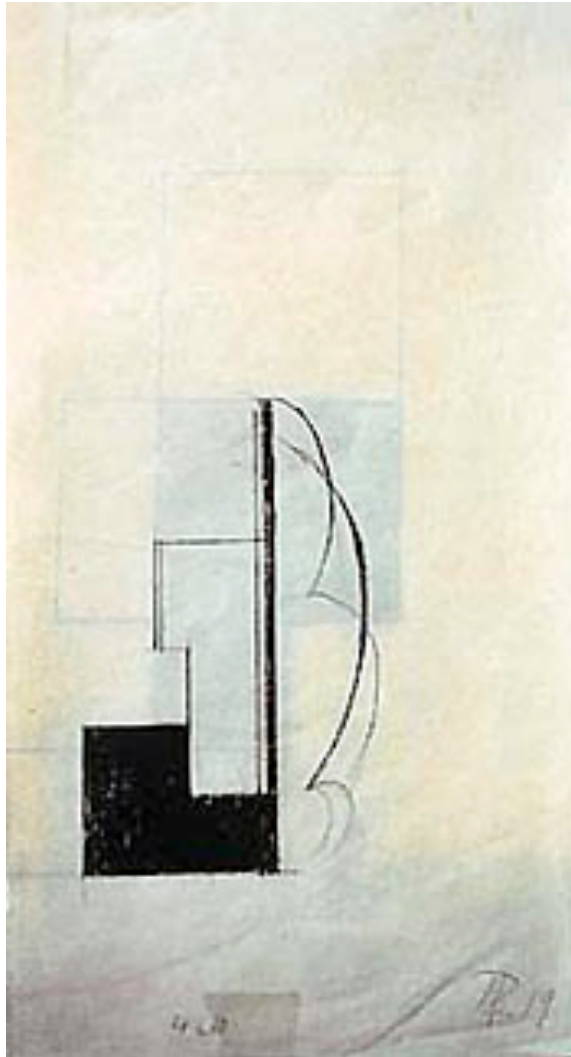


Fig. 66 *Prelude*, Hans Richter, 1919

visual relationships developed around the principle of the “equivalence of opposites”¹⁶; they approached this concept with the principle of musical counterpoint. This led to a number of drawings of “themes” or “instruments” consisting in the transformation of the contrasting relations found in visual elements, orchestrated through different stages, bringing about a dynamic arrangement equivalent to “the music of the orchestrated form.” Richter’s first scroll painting of 1919 *Prelude* (Fig. 66) was described as the orchestration of a theme developed in eleven drawings. It demonstrated such oppositions between visual elements where “a vertical line was accentuated by a horizontal, a strong line connected with a weak one, a single line gained importance from many lines, etc.”¹⁷

Eggeling and Richter unexpectedly discovered that elaborating the transformation of the visual relationships across a scroll forces a type of rhythmic expression into the painting which, in turn, creates a form of dynamic expression that produces a sensation for the eye as it transverses and memorises the sequence of visual elements across the scroll. Eggeling and Richter realised that the kind of accumulated energy that took place in the orchestration of the visual forms across the scroll needed to be released into actual movement: “Movement implied film”.¹⁸ Film was a new medium for them, yet each took the ideas and principles that they had used in their scroll paintings and worked with the constraints and potential of this medium in motion. Eggeling continued to work with the orchestration of form and applied motion to the forms that he had developed for his scroll paintings. His visual forms for film were comparable to music instruments that now had their own defined ways of being articulated through different stages, with motion, over time.

This availability of time and continuity through the medium of film brought to full realisation the release of the movement that had accumulated in the scrolls. Eggeling’s forms still retained what Richter called “graphic elegance.” In his 1924 film *Symphonie Diagonale* (first publicly shown in May 1925 at the Absolute Film Show in Germany), the graphical lines and shapes that appear and disappear, evolve and transform over time were created using paper cut-outs and tin foil figures that were photographed one frame at a time. *Symphonie Diagonale* has a tremendous musical feel to it, in its use of

¹⁶ Hans Richter, “Easel – Scroll – Film,” *Magazine of Art*, February 1952, 78–86, <http://www.rhythmiclight.com/articles/EaselScrollFilm.pdf>

¹⁷ Malcolm Turvey, “Dada between Heaven and Hell: Abstraction and Universal Language in the Rhythm. Films of Hans Richter,” *October*, Summer 2003, No. 105, 13–36. Quoting Hans Richter, “My Experience with Movement in Painting and in Film.”

¹⁸ Richter (1952), op.cit., ibidem.

rhythm, motifs, themes and forms. The film has no soundtrack, but it exudes the most evocative musical quality. The animation of the visual elements of line, figure and shape bring about rhythmic sequences and a sense of dynamics in the progression of these rhythmic figures. Visual “instruments” could now evolve, transform and progress in visual rhythmic sequences.

These parameters of “instruments,” rhythm, dynamics, figures and shape are analogous to the parameters of rhythm, pitch, phrasing and timbre found in musical composition. In abstract animation, the now hard-to-define artist could compose his or her animations like musical compositions, orchestrating the visual elements, creating motifs and repetitive elements, transforming a visual element’s shape over time, and creating a sense of harmony and symmetry in the use of screen space and screen time. All the non-representational strategies for composing music were now available to the abstract filmmaker. Richter realised that time was the basis of this new art form. Starting from his ideas about counterpoint and the equivalence of opposites, Richter moved his focus from orchestrating form to orchestrating time relationships:

The simple square of the movie screen could easily be divided and ‘orchestrated’. These divisions or parts could then be orchestrated in time by accepting the rectangle of the ‘movie-canvas’ as the form element. Thus it became possible to relate (in contrast-analogy) the various movements on this ‘movie-canvas’ to each other – in a formal as well as a temporal sense.¹⁹

Richter’s first abstract film of 1921, *Rhythmus 21*,²⁰ is an excellent example of his ideas about time relationships. The visual forms that are created for the screen exhibit two main characteristics: the static visual composition of each frame of the screen and the temporal composition of both the screen image and the visual forms in the screen image over time.

Following a dispute with Richter, Eggeling broke off their collaboration some time towards the end of 1921.²¹ He moved to Berlin in 1922 where he continued his work on his first film, *Horizontal-Vertical Orchestra*, and took an active part in the artistic life of the city. He met Naum Gabo, Werner Graeff, Arthur Segal, El Lissitzky, Nathan Altamann, Hannah Höch, Zhenia Bogoslavskaya and Henryk Berlewi. Among his close friends were Erich Buchholz and Raoul Hausmann. Kurt Schwitters also moved

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Richter’s dating of 1921 has often been questioned. Others believe the film was actually made later, around 1924.

²¹ For a detailed account of Richter’s and Eggeling’s relationship, see Louise O’Konor’s seminal book entitled *Viking Eggeling 1880-1925. Artist and Filmmaker. Life and Work* (Almqvist & Wiksell: Stockholm, 1971), especially chapter 4.

in this circle when he visited Berlin. According to an interview of Naum Gabo by Louise O’Konor, Eggeling’s ideas were also much discussed in Soviet Constructivist circles.²² That was the year 1922, when the great Russian exhibition was held at the Galerie van Diemen in Berlin.²³ Here, for the first time, the Western European public was presented with a general view of Russian art from 1890 up to Constructivism. It is possible that some information about the work of the young generation of Soviet artists had trickled out (before 1921) in spite of the commercial blockade and cultural boycott imposed on Russia by the Allies up to 1921, but in any case the exhibition at the Galerie van Diemen was the first complete presentation of the new abstract art in the Soviet Union. It aroused great interest in Berlin and later went on to Amsterdam.

In the summer of 1923, Eggeling started working on *Symphonie Diagonale* using scrolls, preliminary studies and sketches as models for the film. At the beginning of the experiments, the separate elements of the composition were cut out of paper (later of tin foil) through the usual technique of single frame exposures (stop motion photography).

While he was working on *Symphonie Diagonale*, Eggeling was evolving a theory based on his film experiments and his studies of form and colour. He called his theory *Eidodynamik* [visual dynamics]. Little is known about it, but the fundamental principle was the projection of coloured lights against the sky to bear the elements of form.²⁴ Fernand Léger was the filmmaker who interested Eggeling most among the experimentalists of the time, and the two met during a short visit which Eggeling made to Paris in 1924.²⁵

On 3rd May 1925, *Symphonie Diagonale* was shown publicly for the first time at a matinee performance jointly arranged by the *Novembergruppe* and the UFA²⁶ in Berlin. The programme, which was repeated on 10th May, was composed as follows:

Film-Matinee, 3.Mai 1925.
Der absolute Film.

²² O’Konor, op.cit., ibidem.

²³ Scholars believed for some time that Lissitsky had a central function in bringing this exhibition to Germany, but it was subsequently clarified that his role in that enterprise was a modest one. See the statement by Naum Gabo in *Studio international* 182, number 938 (November 1971); p. 171. See also Peter Nisbet, “Some Facts on the Organizational History of the van Diemen Exhibition” in *The 1st Russian Show*, catalogue of the Annely Juda Fine Gallery (London, 1983); p.67-72. Nisbet rightly points out that Gabo does not mention Lissitsky’s design of the catalogue cover.

²⁴ O’Konor, op.cit., ibidem.

²⁵ O’Konor, op.cit., ibidem.

²⁶ The Universum Film AG (UFA) was the principal film studio in Germany, home of the German film industry during the Weimar Republic and through to World War II, from 1917 to 1945.

Walter Ruttmann's *Lichtspiel Opus I* premiered in Germany in 1921, the first abstract film to be publicly screened. In the film, Ruttmann mastered the technical means to realise his abstract imagery in film. He patented his particular technical methods in 1921. William Moritz provides an interesting description of his method: "[Ruttmann's] first animations for *Opus No. 1* were painted with oil paints on glass plates beneath an animation camera, shooting a frame after each brush stroke or each alteration because the wet paint could be wiped away or modified quite easily. He later combined this with geometric cut-outs on a separate layer of glass".²⁷

Ruttmann's visual style is considered to be more playful and impressionistic than Eggeling's and Richter's and produces an overall painterly feel both in technique and in the use of screen, colour and movement. Indeed, his technical methods were also painterly and would have had a definite bearing on the resulting imagery. His *Opus* films have been described as paintings that move in time. While Richter and Eggeling focussed on figures, forms and time relationships between visual elements, Ruttmann focussed on a more expressive visual aesthetic for his imagery. He exploited "movement and colour to create choreographies, where entrances and exits, collisions and complementary trajectories establish a linear, cumulative scenario or development in which new configurations, colours and shapes appear right up to the last moments of the film".²⁸ He also used colour as an element of choreography to help structure the film as well as "differentiate certain shapes, movements or repetitions, but [also] sometimes to establish general mood or atmosphere."²⁹ Ruttmann also envisioned his *Lichtspiel Opus I* film to be closely related to music and commissioned the composer Max Butting to compose a string quartet for it. In the music score, Ruttmann provided many indications to ensure that the music precisely synchronised with the visual elements unfolding on the screen.

Coloured Rhythm

Léopold Survage connected his ideas about colour with music and foresaw the potential of film to bring forth his ideas about colour – colour and rhythm in particular. Since sound is the primary element of music and colour is the primary element of painting – Survage believed that rhythm when applied to colour by means of

²⁷ William Moritz, "Restoring the Esthetics of Early Abstract Films", in: Jayne Pilling (ed.), *A Reader in Animation Studies* (John Libbey: Sydney, 1997)

²⁸ Moritz (1997), op.cit.; ibidem.

²⁹ Moritz (1997), op.cit.; ibidem.

movement – the resulting coloured rhythm becomes an abstract form that is superior to the use of colour in static painting and is brought closer to music. Colour sings because it is in rhythmic motion; the principle of mobility brings forth rhythmic motion.³⁰ The alternating series of colour that occurs when colour and rhythm is realised with motion can exert a psychological influence on us similar to the way the alternating series of sound in music exerts a psychological influence.

In Survage's conception rhythm existed independently of colour, and therefore through the mobile animation of colour, rhythm could be captured and aesthetically harnessed resulting in a coloured rhythm.³¹ He believed that the filmic medium could be the means for providing the mobile animation of this coloured rhythm. Survage prepared a series of drawings in 1913, his *Coloured Rhythm: Study for the Film* (Fig. 67), for the purposes of having them realised in film. Unfortunately, he was neither able to secure the funding nor the patent for it and Survage never made the film. Nevertheless, the individual pictures for this film and the concept of using film or cinema to realise the movement of these stills were in place by 1913.

Similarly to Richter and Eggeling, Survage recognised that time was the necessary component to put forward and, in particular, the dynamics of rhythm and movement of visual elements. His intended film *Rythme Coloré* and his series of drawings for the film did not merely illustrate or interpret music; rather, he believed them to be an autonomous form of art, based upon the same psychological premise as that of music. It is the "mode of succession of their elements in time which establishes the analogy between music, sound rhythm, and that coloured rhythm of which I am announcing the realization by means of cinema".³² Colour constituted an essential part of his pure abstract image aesthetic.

Eggeling, Richter, Ruttmann and Survage all came to the realization that motion was needed to fully realise their visual aesthetics. Their works and ideas crossed the "glistening bridge" from still to moving art, as Survage had foreseen in the medium of film.³³

³⁰ Samuel Putnam, *The Glistening Bridge: Léopold Survage and the Spatial Problem in Painting* (Covici-Friede Publishers: New York, 1929); pp112-119.

³¹ Putnam, op.cit.; ibidem.

³² Turvey, op.cit., ibidem.

³³ Guillaume Apollinaire quoted in Robert Russett and Cecile Starr, *Experimental Animation: Origins of a New Art* (Da Capo Press: New York, 1976); p. 35.



Fig. 67 Study for *Coloured Rhythm*, Léopold Survage, 1913

Synchronising Music and Image: Acoustic Laws and Optical Expression

Oskar Fischinger saw the first performance of Walter Ruttmann's *Lichtspiel Opus 1* in 1921 and as a result was inspired to work with absolute cinema and synchronised music.³⁴ Fischinger used music in his films to render the absolute nature of visuals more understandable. As William Moritz explains: "In the spirit of non-objective art, [Fischinger] maintained, correctly, that his films were absolute experiences in and of themselves, not representations of some other object or experience".³⁵ However, even when the music would suggest a flow or structure for the film, Fischinger's visual compositions were composed carefully to "represent visual structures and dialogue with some sort of meaningful conclusion".³⁶ For example, in his *Studies* series started in 1929, he explored a specific visual task in each film. In *Studie No. 9*, for example, he explored streaking afterimages, which were also explored in several other *Studie* films.³⁷

Music adds another dimension to Fischinger's films, where the tightly synchronised non-representational graphics and music appeal directly to the feelings of the viewer. "*The flood of feeling* created through music intensified the feeling and effectiveness of this graphic cinematic expression, and helped to make understandable the absolute film. Under the guidance of music, which was already highly developed, there came the speedy discovery of new laws – the application of acoustic laws to optical expression was possible. As in the dance, new motions and rhythms sprang out of the music, and the rhythms became more and more important".³⁸ By focusing on the rhythm and dynamics of music to enhance the experience of the abstract elements, the visuals and the music at times seem to fuse. The rhythm and the dynamics in each medium have a togetherness and unity.

Fischinger selected music from classical and jazz traditions for his music and image films. Some of the music tracks were chosen by his patron, Baroness Rebay. For example, Rebay commissioned Fischinger to create a film using Bach's *Bradenburg Concerto No. 3*, which resulted in *Motion Painting no. 1* (1947).

³⁴ Acknowledgment and thanks to Cindy Keefer, Director of the Center for Visual Music for expertise and advice in relation to Oskar Fischinger, <http://www.centerforvisualmusic.org/>

³⁵ William Moritz, "The Importance of Being Fischinger," in *Ottawa International Animated Film Festival Program* (1976), <http://www.centerforvisualmusic.org/library/ImportBF.htm>

³⁶ Moritz (1976), op.cit.; ibidem.

³⁷ William Moritz "Non-Objective Film: The Second Generation," in: *Film as Film, Formal Experiment in Film, 1910–1975*, exhibition catalogue, (Hayward Gallery: London, 1979); pp 59–71.

³⁸ Oskar Fischinger, "My Statements Are My Work," *Art in Cinema* catalogue (San Francisco, 1947), <http://www.oskarfischinger.org/MyStatements.htm>

Fischinger was an innovative and versatile filmmaker and inventor. In his work, he straddles several visual music traditions and filmmaking techniques, even inventing his own devices to carry out his ideas. He invented the Lumigraph, a device to perform colour, and a wax-slicing machine, which he used to create a temporal transformation of both soft and hard geometric imagery for his films – he also built one for Walter Ruttmann.³⁹ He created synthetic sound by modifying a camera that was able to photograph ornament drawings and other geometric shapes right onto the film's soundtrack. His *Ornament Sound* (1931) was capable of turning visual shapes into actual sounds.⁴⁰

Longer than any other artist working in the field of animation cinema, Fischinger has sought the deep unity of human nature by drawing on the basic visual shapes found in distant cultures. Fischinger was not part of the Bauhaus movement, nor was he a part of *Die Blaue Reiter*, nonetheless, like all pioneers, he dreamt of a universal language that would stem from the plastic abstraction, and more particularly, the dynamic abstraction of film.

Developing a certain familiarity with the habitual shapes which recur in Fischinger's films will thus allow us a glimpse of the universal language mentioned above. By exploring all the possibilities of orchestration in time and space, Fischinger used a limited number of fundamental geometrical shapes. From these irreducible shapes, devoid of any reference to recognisable objects, Fischinger staged effects of relation, contrast, development and transformation. First and foremost, quadrilaterals – foreshadowed by Malevich's perfect squares, the metaphysical constructions of Mondrian, and Moholy-Nagy's geometric figures lost in space – seem to predominate in his work. Squares and rectangles played an essential role in Richter's efforts to reduce the shape to its most simple expression, in order to uncover their relations and movements. These shapes can be found in his 1917 Dada paintings, his first scroll paintings with successive phases (*Preludium*, 1919) and his first films (*Rhythm 21*, *Rhythm 23*, *Rhythm 25* and *Film Study* in 1926). Squares appear in the first series of consistent objects that Fischinger introduced in *Studie Nr. 3*: they are multiplied and colonise space in *Studie Nr. 6* or *Studie Transmannfilm* (1930); grow into rectangles by

³⁹ For a description of Fischinger's wax cutting machine, see William Moritz, *Oskar Fischinger: Artist of the Century*, in: *Animac magazine*, 2001 (Lleida, Spain), http://www.animac.info/ANIMAC_2001/VERSIO_02/ENG/mag_ing.html

⁴⁰ Oskar Fischinger, "Sounding Ornaments," first published in the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 8, 1932, then widely syndicated in other newspapers, <http://www.oskarfischinger.org/Sounding.htm>

pivoting and changing direction in *Studie Nr. 8*; contrast vividly with comets at the beginning of *Liebesspiel* (1931); move more calmly in *Quadrate* (1934); tremble hypnotically in *Radio Dynamics* (1942); are assembled in mosaic patterns or stand erected in three-dimension as in *Komposition in Blau* (1935); or even represented by cigarette boxes aligned in checkered fashion or in single file as in *Muratti Privat* (1935). Squares also appear in related shapes: in the trapezes or diamonds in *Allegretto* (1936), in the triangles (half squares or rectangles) isolated in *Radio Dynamics* (1942) or gathered and superimposed in *Optical Poem* (1937), and in the repeated rectangles of *Motion Painting No. 1* (1947).

Fischinger also used the figures of the circle and sphere in some animated models he made for Fritz Lang's *Frau im Mond* (1929), which he associated with the cosmic imagery of "the rising of the earth" seen from the moon, and which also appeared in a *trompe-l'oeil* version in *Kreiss* (1933) and in *Optical Poem* (1937). These shapes – also foreshadowed by Malevich, Kandinsky and Delaunay – can be found in the rays of *Studie Nr. 9* (1930), the suns and roses found in *Radio Dynamics*, the circles of *Allegretto*, and the cylindrical towers of *Komposition in Blau*. Fischinger used shapes related to the circle in order to show transition and metamorphosis: whether in open or closed shapes as in *Spirals* (1926), the oracle's mouths of *Studie Nr. 3*, and the circles of snakes superimposed on some fragments in *Wachsexperimente* (1927). The dots of *Studie Nr. 9* also belong to this family of shapes, as well as the endlessly dividing atoms of *Studie Nr. 3*, *Studie Nr. 5*, *Studie Nr. 6*, *Studie Nr. 9* and *Studie Nr. 11* (1932). The use of these shapes bear testimony to Fischinger's continued interest in the metamorphosis of space and matter.

It must be remembered that in the 1910s, a common interest in the articulation of opposite extremes in shapes and colour brought Richter and Eggeling to abandon pictorial subjects to concentrate on conflict or alliance between lines and elementary shapes. All this research about contrasts – in its analogy, in its accentuation and in its reduction of black and white shapes, whether ascending or descending the screen, in its direction and counter-direction of movement – confirms the musical character of these plastic issues. This will lead Eggeling and Richter, from 1919 onwards, to place the successive stages in the evolution of shapes on horizontal paper scrolls as a solution to controlling continuity. By 1920, these "storyboards" were no longer sufficient for Eggeling's and Richter's experimentations. They then started using a camera shot by shot in order to relate the development of shapes and movement through the numerous successive phases of animation film.

German “Absolute Film” Encounters Montage

As seen above, early German avant-garde films, also known as absolute films, elicited much excitement in artistic circles. A few paraphrasing glimpses will suffice here: round blue shapes open into elliptical ones; angular shapes push from the edge of the frame towards the middle; pink and light green ribbons wave over the surface; and pointed forms sting combatively. The artists associated with absolute film, namely Eggeling, Richter and Ruttmann were all formerly painters and had sought to put their paintings in motion.

In May 1925, the *Novembergruppe* organised a matinee entitled “Der Absolute Film” in Berlin. Richter’s *Film is Rhythm*, Eggeling’s *Diagonal Symphony* and Ruttmann’s *Opus 2*, *Opus 3* and *Opus 5* were shown alongside Fernand Léger’s and Dudley Murphy *Images mobiles* (later known as *Ballet Mécanique*) and René Clair’s and Francis Picabia’s *Entr’Acte*. This public showing also marked the end of absolute film production in Germany. The reason for this is twofold. First, the German filmmakers saw *Ballet Mécanique* and *Entr’Acte* for the first time. These films were also abstract, but featured rapid montage sequences (in the style of Abel Gance’s 1920 *La Roue*). Contrary to Eggeling and Richter, Léger did not conjure up rhythm through movements inside the frame, but rather through the montage of shots. Léger’s rhythm, a musical concept as such, triggered by the succession of shots, does not play on abstract geometrical shapes, but rather uses saucepans, cake tins, wine bottles to attain a certain degree of abstraction since these objects are devoid of any context – the gaze thus perceives a ballet of lines, volumes and shades of gray. When human figures are introduced on the screen, they appear fragmented (like Kiki de Montparnasse’s face), upside down (as in the shots of Katherine Murphy’s face), or repeated continuously (such as the washerwoman endlessly climbing the staircase). Second, Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* premiered in Germany in 1925 and introduced German filmmakers to the new constructive language of film: montage.

In opposition to all the films presented at the *Novembergruppe* matinee, René Clair’s and Francis Picabia’s *Entr’Acte* does not repudiate either scenario or the representation of reality. Yet the scenario is ruled by the manipulation of the image: accelerated montage, superimpressions, slow motion, etc. René Clair has a predominantly visual approach to film. His camera rarely stands still. It is a curious, restless camera that must investigate a focal point from many different angles. The mobility of the camera, combined with depth of field and textural distinctness, produces multi-planar shots that

generally centre on a particular motion or set of motions either in harmony (for instance, the parallel shots of the hearse travelling at great speed and that of cars, of moving vehicles, of rollercoasters and of people running) or in counterpoint (through the superimpressions of bicycles riding in opposite directions, and of countryside landscape where one is static and the other is being travelled through). These essentially mobile shots are carefully cut together into sequences, maintaining the basic rhythms both in time and in space, which Clair has decided are appropriate to the action involved. Clair departs from ordinary editorial practice by using continued motion, rather than tensions between shots, to build his sequences. Eisenstein advocated this sort of continued-motion montage in one section of *Film Form*⁴¹, but even he rarely used it – except notably in the Odessa steps sequence of *Potemkin*, where the clash of upward and downward motions was exploited. Clair's concentration on continued motion predates Eisenstein's dialectic, a fact that is evidenced by *Entr'acte*, in which the kinetics of the chase is his chief concern. The camera does not simply follow the motion; it has a motion of its own that complements it. Most directors have preferred to balance more or less static shots to achieve dynamic tensions, rather than exploit the great possibilities of inner motion.

Entr'Acte is further complicated and made particularly interesting by the conflict of the camera's truth with that of the sound track. The camera's truth is communicated in terms of its subject, which is largely motion of one sort or another, while the soundtrack – composed by Erik Satie for the occasion – does not have a subject of its own, but rather an object, which is to distract from the truth of the camera. In ordinary practice, sound is used as a strengthening device for the purpose of heightening realism or to intensify the audience's reaction to the image. Its object is to strengthen or complete the camera's truth. In this film, however, the combination of sound and image does not produce a harmonization: it produces a distinct discord. Sound has here assumed the role of a second intelligence, totally separate from that of the image. Clair has actually expanded the original soliloquy of the silent camera into a sort of dialogue, using the camera as one integral observer and the sound track as a completely separate commentator on the action. The opportunities for irony that may be derived from this practice should be evident.

⁴¹ See "Tonal Montage," section three of "Methods of Montage," in: Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form* (A Harvest Book: New York, 1949); pp 75-78. Even here, Eisenstein emphasizes motion captured by the static camera, in contrast to the motion of Clair's sympathetically dynamic camera. The essay dates from 1929, *Entr'acte* and *Potemkin* from 1925.

As already discussed, there was a high degree of interplay between Soviet and European artists and filmmakers throughout the 1920s. Many artists were concerned with elaborating a new language that would break with the traditional criteria governing classical art. Numerous films, such as Man Ray's *Retour à la raison* (1923), Léger's *Ballet mécanique*, Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Mechanics of the Brain* (1926), Ruttmann's *Berlin Symphony of a Great City*, Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), and Jean Vigo's *A Propos de Nice* (1929), bear testimony to the profuseness of invention and innovation characteristic of this period. It was precisely the power of the combination of the indexical representations of the filmic image and the radical juxtapositions of time and space allowed by montage that drew the attention of so many avant-garde artists to film. Although the absolute films discussed above moved strongly towards abstraction, a great many works began with images of a recognisable reality in order to transform it. On this point, Constructivist art, Soviet montage theory, and the European avant-garde stood in accord: the world as it offers itself to us provides the starting point for both political and aesthetic acts of transformation.

Sergei Eisenstein wrote extensively on montage and its various practices. In his writings, Eisenstein attempted to elaborate an entire theory of the film's status: properly used, film would stand as the most splendid illustration of the major tendencies in humanity's cultural development. That he intended his own films to reflect film's proper potential does not detract from a pressing need to study his broad theory of montage. This will be the initial focus of the next chapter, where the proponents of the Soviet montage school will be discussed within the framework of their montage practices.

CHAPTER FIVE: Soviet Montage, Rhythm and the City

The technique of film montage became world famous through the Soviet films of the 1920s: *Strike* (1924), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *The Man With the Movie Camera* (1929). When Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* came out, it sent ripples of excitement throughout the art world and influenced avant-garde films to experiment with the technique of montage. According to Rosalind Krauss, montage revealed itself to be *the* “structuring principle of spacing”¹ – and proved to have a lasting impact on all art forms. Russian filmmakers called for a revolution of the arts in parallel to the social and political revolution that was being operated in their country at the time. For these young revolutionaries, it was curiously the American model that epitomised modernity with its cult of the machine and speed, with its frenetic rhythms, with its burlesque films, with its serials, etc – especially through montage, a brand new means of expression. The first part of this chapter will span Soviet cinema and in particular the works of such artists as Lev Kuleshov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein. It will focus on the montage theories of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, and more particularly how their artistic affiliations influenced their work. Finally, visual rhythm and montage will be discussed in order to show their influence on three city films of the late 1920s and early 1930s: *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927), *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) and *A Propos de Nice* (1930).

As explained in the introduction, DW Griffith was a pragmatic man who turned to invention because of the primary need to tell a story. Contrary to this, the new Soviet filmmakers were theoreticians: the avant-garde spirit with its manifestoes, its revolutionary commitment in need of justification, as well as the scarcity of the film strip, all encouraged these artists to ponder and reflect on each idea extensively before turning the lever of their cameras. It is striking to notice that, beyond unavoidable divergences, all the theoretical texts produced converged – not without excess – in their celebration of what they considered to be the “sinews of war” of cinematographic language: montage. The term “montage”, which Eisenstein rightly highlighted as designating an approach that belongs not only to cinema but also to all art forms, corresponds to an art practice that emphasises: the practice of montage required the artist to get his hands dirty, thus harking back to the work of the “engineer”, of the “producer” and not of the inspired dreamer; the constructed and wilful relation

¹ Benjamin Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art”. In: *Artforum*, September 1982.

between the diverse assembled parts (similarly to the parts of a machine) and its various elements (materials, forms, meanings whether literary, photographic, and so on); the intentionality of the artist where chance seems excluded (elements are chosen and assembled in order to construct relations to convey meaning). Indeed, regarding the latter, the notion and practice of montage (and also collage) does not stem from any form of ideology *per se*, the history of montage proves that it came to constitute a powerful ideological weapon, like for example in the work of Heartfield or the Russian Constructivist filmmakers.

Sergei Eisenstein stands as one of the most prominent revolutionary film directors in Soviet cinema. In the twenties, he employed new and advancing techniques to further both the art of film and the dissemination of Soviet ideology over Russia. Historians recognise his role in depicting the Russian revolution in a favourable light to the Soviets. Moreover, his dedication both to filmmaking and theorising attests of his passion and genius. Eisenstein regarded montage as the most significant tool for filmmaking: "Cinema is, first and foremost, montage".² However, his ideas diverged from Lev Kuleshov's. While Kuleshov believed montage involved the linking or sequential addition of shots, Eisenstein called for images to collide dialectically in order to render their multiplied meanings more powerful than that of individual shots. For Eisenstein, montage went far beyond the mere splicing of shots and the simple replica of an organic and perceptual process.

The semiotic status of cinematographic principles was stressed by Lev Kuleshov: "A shot must be treated like a sign, like a letter". It is to Kuleshov that we owe the famous experiment, known as the *K-effect*, whereby one and the same shot assumed different meanings according to its co-ordination with different preceding and succeeding shots. This experiment consisted of a series of montage fragments linked by actors' entrances and exits, so that various parts of Petrograd were seen as contiguous, whereas anyone familiar with the city knew that they were miles apart. This experiment was in fact nothing more than the rational formulation of the contiguity match long since mastered at the practical level by D. W. Griffith. In *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), for example, a whole "imaginary" neighbourhood is similarly constructed by laying end-to-end fragments of settings which are brought together only by the successive frame exits and entrances of the actors. Following these laboratory experiments, the films that came out of Kuleshov's workshop attest to another concern, not unrelated to the first:

² Sergei Eisenstein, "Film Form" in: Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticisms: Introductory Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); p.15.

studying and appropriating the codes governing the major genres of the capitalist film industry – the spy serial, as in *The Death Ray* (1925); the comedy, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924); the “Far North” adventure drama, *By the Law* (1926). The guiding principle behind all these productions was that the institutional mode of representation, the genres and other coded systems founded upon it, offered ideal vehicles in the ideological struggle because of the privileged relationships which they already enjoyed with mass audiences.

After the Kuleshov group disbanded in 1925, its ambitions were no doubt best achieved in *Miss Mend* (1926), directed by an ex-disciple of Kuleshov, Boris Barnett – in collaboration with Fyodor Otsep. In this film the principle of political didacticism through pastiche is maintained, but with one fundamental difference: this monumental “serial” (three parts, over four hours long) frequently shifts abruptly from one popular genre to another. Spy thriller, sentimental melodrama, romantic comedy, slapstick farce follow each other in quick succession. The intention is clearly to undercut the escapist and alienating absorption of the popular genres.

I have no wish to establish, in the context of this inventory, any hierarchical order whatsoever. The wide range of Soviet attitudes and options, which run from Kuleshov's pastiche to Dziga Vertov's “deconstruction”, corresponded to a pluralism indispensable to the Socialist ethic. It also reflected the very concrete and highly diversified needs of Soviet society, coming into existence under notoriously complex and difficult conditions. Kuleshov's undertaking thus appears doubly justified. The urban masses were already quite familiar with the current mode of representation and forms of expression, and it was obvious that one important way of reaching them consisted in acquiring the theoretical mastery of that mode and in appropriating its forms of expression. Furthermore, although the bulk of the peasantry did not come to know the cinema until after the revolution, it takes the optimism of a Vertov to become convinced that linear expectations with regard to the cinema would only be produced by previous film-going experience, and that these peasant masses were consequently “unspoiled”.

Vsevolod Pudovkin also came out of the Kuleshov workshop. His approach was not fundamentally different from that of his mentor, although his methodology – and, of course, his stylistics, which are not the subject of this section – is quite different and his ambition, in a sense, far greater. Pudovkin was striving principally to extend the possibilities of the existing system, while maintaining its essential principles. This

undertaking has undeniably enriched our cultural heritage, with such remarkable films as *The End of Saint Petersburg* (1927) or *The Deserter* (1933), but it was certainly not devoid of contradictions. Significantly enough, these actually repeated, at a higher level of elaboration, the contradictions experienced by the pioneers of the early and formative periods. Let us now attempt to explain the emergence of such contradictions within the context of Soviet montage practice.

Eisenstein, Vertov and Cultural Context

In the period spanning 1924 to 1930, the Soviet filmmakers mentioned above, all exhibited the montage style in order to control rhythm and create a new synthesis where the overall meaning lies not in individual shots but in the very act of juxtaposition. As David Bordwell explains in his essay “The Idea of Montage in Soviet Art and Film”³ there was “a certain broad agreement on the foundations of montage”,⁴ yet “Kuleshov, Pudovkin, Eisenstein and Vertov were not a unified school; significant aesthetic disagreements separated them”.⁵ Montage emerged as the formal aesthetic principle at work in many art forms at the time, not just cinema. This means a certain cultural and artistic context beckoned its use. Traditionally, film criticism explains this phenomenon by three elements: the experiments carried out by Kuleshov between 1919 and 1924 influenced other artists; film stock was scarcely available during this period; and Griffith’s *Intolerance*, first screened in the Soviet Union in 1919, influenced filmmakers. Although these three factors certainly had some kind of influence on the development of montage, they cannot by themselves explain why the technique of montage emerged at precisely that time – in my view, the artistic context in which montage emerged played a major part in its widespread use and theorisation. Indeed, as has been discussed in all previous chapters, the technique of montage does not limit its field of application to the medium of film, its fundamental principles – the juxtaposition of fragments and heterogeneous parts, the conceptual interpretation required of the viewer, the new relations between the constituent parts and the whole – are applicable to music, literature, sculpture, painting and drama. As Vsevolod Meyerhold stated: “Given man’s power of memory, the existence of two facts in juxtaposition prompts their correlation; no sooner do we begin to recognize this

³ David Bordwell, “The Idea of Montage in Soviet Art and Film”, *Cinema Journal*, volume 11, number 2 (Spring, 1972); pp 9-17.

⁴ Bordwell, op. cit.; p. 9.

⁵ Bordwell, op. cit., ibidem.

correlation than a composition is born and its ideas begin to assert themselves”.⁶ It is interesting to note that the structuring principle of montage can be found under many guises: Cubist painting, Apollinaire’s poetry, the graphic design of John Heartfield, as well as the *musique concrète* of Italian Futurists.⁷

There are two distinct tendencies in applying the technique of montage in Soviet film: Kuleshov’s films and most of Pudovkin’s films use montage for purposes of rhythm and narrative in order to highlight the nuances of the story, while Vertov’s films and Eisenstein’s films reach far beyond narrative editing to create metaphorical associations for the spectator. Nonetheless Vertov’s and Eisenstein’s theories often diverge radically. Eisenstein strove to “[transmute] to screen form the abstract concept, the course and halt of concepts and ideas – without intermediary. Without recourse to story, or invented plot, in fact directly – by means of the image-composed elements as filmed”.⁸ For Vertov, the film included ideological argumentation, “any political, economic, or other motif”.⁹ Both Eisenstein’s and Vertov’s cinematic practices were strongly experimental, and this is in part due to the artistic context in which these artists evolved.

If both trends of Soviet montage are to be analysed, it is interesting to note that the artists involved came from very different backgrounds. On the one hand, Kuleshov – who trained as a painter – and his pupil Pudovkin mainly worked on the filmic medium while remaining somewhat aloof of the artistic activity of the seminal years 1917 to 1924. Vertov and Eisenstein, on the other hand, were engrossed with the artistic activity of their time. Vertov wrote novels, poetry and *musique concrète* before his involvement with the filmic medium, and always remained closely tied to the Futurist movement. Eisenstein was a polygraphic artist with a particular penchant for the theatre and the graphic arts – he designed posters and stage sets and directed theatre productions. Although Eisenstein studied briefly with Kuleshov in 1923, his earlier work with the Proletcult Theatre and particularly Vsevolod Meyerhold seems to have more decisively influenced his film practice. In addition, both Eisenstein and Vertov joined the *Lef* group, a faction of artists concerned with political and aesthetic

⁶ Vsevolod Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre* (Hill and Wang: New York, 1969); p.322.

⁷ For interesting attempts to account for such similarities, see Georges Sadoul, *Dziga Vertov* (Ivrea Editions: Paris, 1971), pp 17-54; Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, volume IV (Routledge: New York, 1999), pp 239-259; and Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years* (Vintage Books/Random House: New York, 1968); pp 331-352.

⁸ Jay Leyda (ed.), *Film Form* (Harcourt, Brace and World: New York, 1963); p.125.

⁹ Dziga Vertov, “Kinoks Revolution” in: Harry Geduld (ed.) *Film Makers on Film Making* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1967); p.88.

revolutionary trends. Luda and Jean Schnitzer have usefully described the essential differences between the theories of Vertov and Eisenstein and those of the Kuleshov group: Kuleshov and Pudovkin stood in the artistically advanced wing of the conservative filmmakers, while Vertov and Eisenstein were firmly in the advanced sector of the extreme left artists.¹⁰ As David Bordwell aptly concludes that while “the standard explanations for the flowering of montage have emphasized the role of Kuleshov, a historically complete account must also consider the context within which Vertov and Eisenstein were working”.¹¹ And indeed this context clearly demonstrates that the technique of montage was a major stratagem deployed by much avant-garde Soviet art.

Once there were clear incoherencies between the Futurist movement and the goals of Soviet society, the movement split. One faction, led by Vladimir Tatlin, advocated the use of industrial materials in art that is accessible to all. Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International*, conceived in 1919 but never built, exemplified the role of the artist as an ideologically functional member of society. Out of Tatlin’s example the Constructivist art movement emerged around 1921. These artists spanned a broad spectrum of art forms from literature and theatre to sculpture, painting and film. Although they were as aesthetically experimental as the Futurists had been, they refuted the notion of an elite and saw the artist as a creator of socially useful and revolutionary products. The most radical exponents of Constructivism gathered around Vladimir Mayakovsky’s avant-garde *Lef* group: Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova, Osip Brik and Victor Schlovsky, Aleksei Kruchenykh and Boris Pasternak, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Sergei Eisenstein, and Dziga Vertov. The artists who contributed to the *Lef* journal demanded the destruction of traditional art forms and a new style for a new society. Mayakovsky commented: “LEF equals coverage of great social themes through all of Futurism’s resources”.¹² One of these artistic resources was montage.

The year 1923 saw the emergence of Kuleshov’s most important montage experiments. At the same time, the *Lef* poets declared: “We have now swept away the dust of verbal antiquity and shall only make use of fragments”.¹³ Alexander Rodchenko made his first photomontages to illustrate *Lef* and Mayakovsky’s poem *Pro*

¹⁰ Luda and Jean Schnitzer, *Vingt ans de cinéma soviétique* (C.I.B.: Paris, 1963); pp 26-31.

¹¹ Bordwell, op. cit.; p. 11.

¹² Herbert Marshall, *Mayakovsky* (Hill and Wang: London, 1965); pp 90.

¹³ Vladimir Mayakovsky and Osip Brik, “Our Literary Work”, reprinted in George Reavy and Marc Slonim (eds), *Soviet Literature: An Anthology* (Covici Friede: New York, 1934); p.399.

Eto. Still in the same year, Eisenstein's production of Ostrovsky's *Every Wise Man* treated the text as a series of circus acts, pantomimes and gags – a technique which Eisenstein called “montage of attractions”. Vertov was also experimenting with montage in his *Kino-Pravda* documentaries around this time.

It was during this period that the affinities of Eisenstein and Vertov with the *Lef* group were strongest. Eisenstein's first major theoretical essay, entitled “The Montage of Attractions” appeared in the same issue of the *Lef* journal as Vertov's central position article, entitled “Kinoks-Revolution”. Eisenstein's essay defines an “attraction” as a “primary element in the construction of a theatrical production”, and sees in the montage of such “aggressive moments” the means of “guiding the spectator into a desired direction (or a desired mood), which is the main task of every functional theatre (agit, poster, health education, etc.)”.¹⁴ A Futurist, and Constructivist, fascination with machines permeates Vertov's essay, which claims that the mechanical eye of the camera can perfect and fulfil human vision: “I, a machine, am showing you a world, the likes of which only I can see”.¹⁵ Vertov, like Eisenstein, insists that the world can be constructed out of fragments: “It is all a matter of juxtaposition of one visual moment with another”.¹⁶

Eisenstein, having analysed the basic phenomenon of the filmic medium (the emergence of the illusion of movement), could reject the common illusionist mimetic representation of movement in film and come to an understanding of the filmic movement. He could deal instead with the possibilities of the medium for freezing movement, for playing with immobility and intervals, and for shifting between shots and creating a non-existing movement through the montage of shots.¹⁷ We can find in Eisenstein's writing different and contradictory concepts meant to exist simultaneously, such as montage understood as a construction of attractions and as a construction constituted over the dominant. Whereas the montage of attractions is justified through an appeal to the reflexological stimulus, the construction over the dominant can only be understood in the frame of Gestalt psychology. Eisenstein even approached the term “attraction” from different points of view. He highlighted the visual moment, in analogy to elements of photomontage by Rodchenko and Grosz; he

¹⁴ Sergei Eisenstein, “Montage of Attractions”, reprinted in Jay Leyda (ed.), *The Film Sense* (Harcourt: New York, 1967); pp 230-231.

¹⁵ Geduld, op.cit.; p.86.

¹⁶ Geduld, op.cit.; p.88.

¹⁷ This praxis was continued by later avant-garde artists: Charles Dekeukeleire, Paul Sharits, Werner Nekes and Hollis Frampton.

stressed the direct shock effect that comes with such phenomena as the representation of evidence, the stimulation of fear, of surprise, etc.; he emphasised the physiological changes that can be achieved in the muscles of the spectators through the new school of acting, based on Eisenstein's concept of expressive movement; and finally, he underlined the emotional ambiguity of the spectator whereby he must be forced relentlessly into a state where the emotions shift constantly (Eisenstein called this kind of stimulus "compound attraction" and refers to lyric and grotesque moments in the films of Charlie Chaplin and to the pathos and sadism in religious ecstasy). This period of art history also saw tremendous cross-pollination between Constructivist artists in various media. It is particularly interesting to note Eisenstein's reference to artists Grosz and Rodchenko. He describes montage in terms of independent attractions structuring the whole,¹⁸ a principle which he finds analogous to Grosz's "rough sketches" or Rodchenko's "photo-illustrations".¹⁹

Vertov's concept of montage is particularly close to certain ideas and techniques which flourished among the Futurists and later in the *Lef* group. Both in his writings and, implicitly, in his films, Vertov reiterated the fundamental principle that the artistic medium (in this case, the language of cinema) must be autonomous, self-referential and universal. The constant foregrounding in Vertov's films of the two basic structural elements of cinema – the shot and montage – is analogous to the Futurist foregrounding of the structural element of verse – sound and rhythm. In much Futurist poetry, the destruction of the conventional semantic, syntactic and prosodic elements liberates the words from any kind of causal relationship; they become unmotivated and are thus perceived as autonomous. Similarly in his films, Vertov destroys both the conventional semantics of the shots – by means of unusual frame compositions and camera angles – and the conventional syntagmatic relationships that would advance a narrative – by means of a striking use of montage. The result is a palpable texture of

¹⁸ For a further discussion of this theory, please refer to François Albera, "Eisenstein and the Theory of the Photogram" in: Ian Christie and Richard Taylor (eds), *Eisenstein Rediscovered* (Routledge: London and New York, 1993); pp 200-210. Albera dedicates his article to Eisenstein's essay "The Dramaturgy of Film Form" written in 1929, using this text to argue for his vision of Eisenstein as a Constructivist and finding in the theory of the photogram a basis for his interpretation of Eisenstein's montage. The term "photogramme" has been extensively used in French film theory as a quasi-technical term for the individual film frame when it is considered as an element in the series of frames which comprise a shot. This contrasts with the term "cadre", referring to the composition (framing) of the image, which is the usual sense of "frame" in English. The issues at stake in Albera's essay are best rendered by the somewhat unusual term "photogram", or in Eisensteinian terms "independent attractions".

¹⁹ Richard Taylor (ed.), *SM Eisenstein. Selected Works. Volume I. Writings, 1922-34* (BFI Publishing: London 1988); p. 34.

visual analogies and rhythmic segments. The kinship between cinema and poetry was emphasised by Vertov when he noted in his diary, after having waited for Mayakovsky in vain: “I wanted to tell him about my attempts to create a film poem in which montage phrases would rhyme one with the other”.²⁰

Vertov adapts the concept of rhythm, as the fundamental principle of verse structure, to his cinematographic production. He works out what is known as “the theory of intervals” or scansion. He declares that the film has to be built “upon intervals”, that is, upon “a movement between the fragments, the frames; upon the proportions of these fragments between themselves, upon the transitions from one visual impulse to the one following it.” He indicates that equally important to the movement between images is “the spectacular value of each distinct image in its relations to all others engaged in the “montage battle”. And concludes by saying that the ultimate task of the filmmaker is “to reduce these mutual attractions [...] these mutual repulsions of images among themselves [...] this whole multiplicity of intervals [...] to a simple spectacular equation [...] expressing in the best possible manner the essential theme of the cine-thing [film]”.²¹

The notions of rhythm and montage discussed in the preceding section diverge from the concept of “rhythmic montage” found in Eisensteinian theory. In “Methods of Montage”,²² Eisenstein discusses five types of montage, from the most simple “metric montage”, which consists of splicing together segments of the film of a mathematically predetermined length, independently from the content of the text, to the most complex “intellectual montage”. “Rhythmic montage” follows on from metric montage whereby “the actual length does not coincide with the mathematically determined length of the piece according to a metric formula [...] but] its practical length derives from the specifics of the piece, and from its planned length according to the structure of the sequence”.²³ Eisenstein provides an example of rhythmic montage from his film *Battleship Potemkin*:

The rhythmic drum of the soldiers’ feet as they descend the steps violates all *metrical* demands. Unsynchronised with the beat of the cutting, this drumming comes in *off-beat* each time, and the shot itself is entirely different in its solution with each of these appearances. The final pull of tension is supplied by the transfer from the rhythm of the descending feet to another rhythm – a new kind of downward movement – the next intensity

²⁰ Dziga Vertov, “The Writings of Dziga Vertov”, *Film Culture*, number 25 (Summer 1962); p.56.

²¹ Vertov, op. cit.; p.65 for all passages.

²² Leyda (1963), op. cit.; p.72-83.

²³ Leyda (1963), op. cit.; p.74.

level of the same activity – the baby carriage rolling down the steps. The carriage functions as a directly progressing accelerator of the advancing feet. The stepping descent passes into a rolling descent.²⁴

Far from following the Eisensteinian mathematical model for rhythmic montage, Vertov wove in each of his films a subtle net of semantic relationships by means of rhythmic patterning. The result of this kind of highly intuitive montage creates a meaningful whole, based on the same principles that sustain modern poetry or music. The same theory of the interval and notion of visual rhythm permeates a number of films produced in the late twenties and early thirties, namely Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) and Jean Vigo's *A Propos de Nice* (1930). In these films, a parallel can be established in terms of the rhythm of montage – i.e. the alternation of shots of different duration in a sequence – and the visual rhythm – i.e. the analogy of images, frame composition, and action. This will be the focus of the next section.

The Visual Rhythm of the City

When Walter Ruttmann made his *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* in 1927, the film was met with well-deserved attention in the reviews as well as in the discussions of filmmakers themselves. It acted as a signal for the production of similar, more or less poetic documentaries²⁵ about other European capitals. Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures* (1926) depicted the French capital, Paris; Dziga Vertov showed Moscow as a machine metropolis in his *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929); and Jean Vigo's *A Propos de Nice* (1930) painted a social portrait of Nice and its "Promenade des Anglais". Among the main topics of deliberation was the rhythm of the city. In this section, I will discuss some of the issues surrounding the notion of rhythm in city films.

Since *Berlin* is presented as an urban symphony infused with montage, it seems relevant to question the modalities according to which montage is represented and provides the film with its resolutely modern character. Modernity is represented through the technology and mechanics found in the objects which are privileged on screen – means of transport, trains, cranes, typewriters, pistons, wheels – thus conferring an aesthetics and rhythm to the film. *Berlin* starts off with a brilliant sequence featuring a train – a mechanistic object, the product of technology and the industrial revolution – whose locomotive paces frenetically towards Berlin. Speed,

²⁴ Leyda (1963), op. cit.; ibidem.

²⁵ For a discussion of the documentary film as a type, see Lewis Jacobs (ed.), *The Documentary Tradition* (Norton: New York, 1979).

omnipresent in the opening scene, is here coupled with another spectacular element: montage. Indeed, a rapid sequence of frames juxtaposes and combines images of the locomotive, rail track, telegraph poles, the train's metal wheels with successive images of the landscape as seen from the inside of the speeding train. The montage technique is used further to combine these same images to new objects (an iron bridge, houses on the periphery of the track, stations, other trains, streets, wagons, historical landmarks of the city, a church), to culminate with the arrival of the train in the station of the city of Berlin – the city is announced on a card signpost which is thrown at the spectators. Only then are we granted a pause in the majestic spectacle of the machine, as we are immersed in the inactivity and silence of the city in the early hours of the morning.

The representation of the machine finds itself highlighted by two distinct processes. It is both the speed of movement inside individual frames, and the use of montage, that combine to create the rhythm found in the opening scene. It would therefore seem that rhythm, as instrument of modernity, is heightened when the objects are represented metonymically, that is when all their other characteristics are neutralised or diminished. We are here confronted with a kind of stylization of the attributes of the machine, and it is particularly these attributes that guarantee a harmonious relation between the rhythm of the images and the speed of the train. Little remains of the materiality of the machine which fascinated the Futurists and Soviet Productivists, the machine is transcended while it is movement, an abstract principle, that supersedes the reality of the machine. Its frenetic progression can only recall that of a musical crescendo whose resolution can only end in a final explosion: the arrival in Berlin.

The simultaneity of frenetic speed and complete calm at the end of the opening scene of *Berlin* is characteristic of the duality of rhythm in city films. The simultaneity of chaos and order, for example, is strikingly exemplified in Vertov's opening shot of *Man with a Movie Camera* which shows the cameraman climbing a gigantic movie-camera placed directly opposite the film audience. This endorsement of absolute cinematic vision is fortified by a similar image towards the end of the film, depicting "the man with the camera" looming large above the city crowds.

Vertov also strongly relies on montage effects to picture life in the city as a rapid succession of disparate and coherent images. The film thus exploits a contrast between an ordering perspective from above and the disorienting fragmentation of life experienced below. This antagonistic rivalry of two opposite concepts wrestling for dominance as each alternately forces the together to literally go underground, not only informs the structure of Vertov's film but exemplifies its primary goal: armed with his

movie camera, the cameraman plunges into the city to seek out and shoot the life surrounding him. During the course of the film, the camera indeed becomes a weapon which increasingly dominates and ultimately emerges as its sole hero. Vertov's film comes to the realisation that the modern ideal of total vision necessarily supersedes the human and thus undermines rather than strengthens the notion of the individual or of class. Instead of augmenting human perception, the cinematic eye is unwittingly unveiled as a self-sustaining, autonomous form of vision that eradicates what it ought to liberate – the bourgeois/Marxist subject understood as the agent of society. While Ruttmann, much like Vertov, confronts his audience with a stunning array of city impressions, he is not primarily concerned with the self-conscious exploration of cinematic representation. Instead, he focuses on the conflict between culture and nature, trying to reconcile them through the deliberate merging of linear and cyclical movements meant to identify the metropolis as the new, yet nonetheless “natural” home of modern man.

Since both Vertov's and Ruttmann's films lack distinct plot lines, their popularity among contemporary audiences was indeed mostly based on the spectator's experience of thrill and excitement evoked through the use of accelerated montage, as pointed out by contemporary critics. Siegfried Kracauer, for example, reprimanded Ruttmann for providing audiences with visual pleasure devoid of a deeper meaning.²⁶ Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, too, was judged inaccessible and denounced as “confused, formalistic, aimless, and self-satisfied trickery”.²⁷ So instead of presenting a critical analysis of modern city life, it could be argued that Ruttmann and Vertov used both the camera and the city for their representation in an entertaining manner that lacked any critical analysis of urban life.

In psychoanalytical terms, one might say that these films were judged regressive in spite of their apparently novel and progressive method of filming. Not only did they invite their audiences to enjoy the childish pleasure of looking for looking's sake, they also reoriented the medium of film back to its origins by reviving the early “cinema of attractions”²⁸ that had preceded narrative film and its focus on individual stories. In fact, one might take it further and argue that both films glorify visual plenitude and the

²⁶ See Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1947); p.184.

²⁷ Quoted in Vlada Petric, *Constructivism in Film: Man with a Movie Camera – A Cinematic Analysis* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1987); p.65.

²⁸ The term was introduced by Tom Gunning, “An Aesthetics of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator”, *Art and Text*, number 34 (1989); pp 34-45.

ubiquity of the camera enjoyed by the audience. The audience sees everything and every aspect of the city. Celebrating the visual omniscience provided by the camera, Vertov indeed anticipated what Christian Metz called “primary cinematic identification”, in expressing the basic principles of the theory of the cinematic apparatus *avant la lettre*:

I am the camera’s eye. I, a machine, am showing a world, the likes of which only I can see. Starting from today, I am forever free of human immobility. I am in perpetual movement. I approach and draw away from things – I crawl under them – I climb on them. My road leads toward the creation of a fresh perception of the world. I decipher, in a new way, a world unknown to you.²⁹

So what is the price to pay for obtaining the omniscient and ubiquitous gaze celebrated by Ruttmann and Vertov? The answer clearly relates to the classical notion of human subjectivity and historical agency. What is lost in the city films is a sense of visual control over the images on the screen. The gap between our own limited visual field and the seemingly limitless visual scope of the cinematic apparatus is too wide to be bridged through the spectator’s identification with the “eye” of the camera.

This poses a new question: If it is not us, then who is controlling these images? Both films triumphantly announce the arrival of the machine-man as the inevitable product of modernity’s attempt to see and reveal “everything”. Indeed, Ruttmann emphasised: “A counter-point had to emerge from the rhythm of man and machine”.³⁰ The fusion of man and machine clearly underlies the montage rhythm both of Vertov’s and Ruttmann’s films. Their ultimate purpose is to enable the urban masses to recognise themselves on the screen as parts of a larger entity called the metropolis. Vertov repeatedly cross-fades human faces with machine parts of similar shape or presents human mechanics surrounded by, and thus part of, the powerful machines they supervise and maintain. In his writings, Vertov consciously embraces this fusion of man and machine and acknowledges the creation of a machine-man as the ultimate goal of his films:

I am kino-eye. I am a builder [...] I create a man more perfect than Adam, I create thousands of different people in accordance with preliminary blueprints and diagrams of different kinds [...] From one person I take the hands, the strongest and most dexterous; from another I take the legs, the swiftest and most shapely; from a third, the most beautiful and expressive

²⁹ Dziga Vertov, “Kinoks. A Revolution”, in Annette Michelson (ed.), *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1984); p.17.

³⁰ Quoted in Jeanpaul Goergen, *Walter Ruttmann: Eine Dokumentation* (Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek: Berlin, 1989); p.80.

head – and through montage I create a new, perfect man.³¹

Man with a Movie Camera is meant to explore and put to the test Vertov's theory of the spectator's identification with the camera. The film literally merges the "Man" with the "Movie Camera" as it presents numerous match-cuts between the human eye and the camera lens, suggesting a powerful union that culminates in several shots superimposing the two. In theory, according to Vertov, this fusion is meant to overcome "the slavery of the imperfect and limited human eye" by making the "eye submit to the will of the camera".³² Vertov's language is telling indeed, for he endows the camera with a subjective will of its own which he explicitly denies the human individual. Vertov, of course, believed in film mainly as an aesthetic means to a political end. Since he trusted the power of the camera to penetrate beneath the surface of apparent reality and to record the facts of "life-as-it-is", he fully shared Walter Benjamin's well-known optimism regarding the emancipatory power of cinematic perception to reverse the ongoing process of modern alienation. Similarly to Benjamin, Vertov's goal is to burst open reified social relations, hoping to create a new cinematic truth of modern life by means of an "absolute vision" which can be understood universally and judged accordingly.³³ Vertov's cinematic practice, however, celebrates the inherent psychological complicity between film and urban life to the point of complete fusion: the incredible speed of Vertov's montage merges with the documentary recording of real city flux and traffic. A crucial transformation that blurs the boundaries between inside and outside, man and machine.

As described above, the city symphony has traditionally been depicted as the battleground for the new laws of urban perception and has given rise to visions of a world devoid of the "human". This view where aesthetics reigns over political and historical representations conveys a depersonalised and uninhabited picture of the city. Nonetheless human figures and portraits are represented in avant-garde city films and I will try to argue in the following section that these films can also be analysed differently, according to class and gender issues.

³¹ Michelson, op. cit.; ibidem.

³² Michelson, op. cit.; ibidem.

³³ According to Walter Benjamin, Vertov's and Ruttmann's films provide an excellent opportunity for the metropolitan masses to "rehearse" and "master" the new paradigm of modern perception. Again, the question arises as to the emancipatory or reactionary teleology implicit in this rehearsal, which indeed, may serve only to transform human beings into well-programmed, functional machines rather than critical subjects.

The City Symphony

Common descriptions of the kaleidoscopic and rhythmic visual regime of the city film emphasize the city as a complex spatial arrangement of buildings, traffic, streets and boulevards.³⁴ While the kinaesthetic visual modes of the city symphony, discussed in the previous section and traditionally alluded to in reference to rhythm, partially revive the visual intensity and pleasurable observation characteristic of the early “cinema of attractions”, all too frequently, however, critical analyses of the extraordinary visual capacities of the city film, including the city symphony, ignore the fact that such a visual regime depicts cities which are traversed and occupied by people, “as material presence...as child and adult”.³⁵ Specifically, representations of the corporeal in the

³⁴ Scott Bukatman elaborates various perspectives on kaleidoscopic visuality in a range of texts, including city films, in “Kaleidoscopic Perceptions”, chapter 5 of his *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2003). On rhythm in the city symphony see, for example, Jiri Kolaja and Arnold Foster, “Berlin, Symphony of a City as a Theme of Visual Rhythm”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, volume 23, number 2 (1965); pp 353-358, Martin Medhurst and Thomas Benson, “The City: The Rhetoric of Rhythm”, *Communication Monographs*, volume 48 (March 1981); pp 54-72, and Walter Schobert, “Painting in Time” and “Visual Music”: On German Avant-Garde Films of the 1920s” in Dietrich Scheunemann, *Expressionist Film: New Perspectives*, (Camden house: New York, 2003). The metaphor of rhythm was, perhaps inevitably, implicated with descriptions of 1920s city films as city symphonies. The word symphony was a common part of avant-garde film production in Weimar Germany. Viking Eggeling's experiments in revolving pictures resulted in his *Diagonal Sinfonie* of 1924. His collaborator Hans Richter extended the musical metaphor in the title of his films *Rythmus 21* (1921) and *Rhythmus 23* (1923). Prior to his *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, Walter Ruttmann made four abstract films informed by music: *Opus I-IV* (1919-1923). The symphony popularised by *Berlin* led to further experiments in visual music, among them Richter's *Renn-symphonie* [Racing Symphony] (1928-29) and *São Paulo, Symphonie d'un métropole* by Rudolph Rex and Adalberto Kemeny (1929). Soon after the completion of his *The Man with a Movie Camera* Vertov published a statement in which he argued that his film is constructed in the “form of a visual symphony”. The statement is reprinted in Annette Michelson, *Kino-Eye*, op. cit.. Tracing a lineage for the city symphonies of the 1920s to avant-garde formalist experiments raises the question of origins of the city symphony form, a point which has attracted a degree of critical attention. Most critics concerned with this question propose Guido Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures* (1926), a film completed before *Berlin*, though not premiered until after the release of Ruttmann's film, as a precursor. Annette Michelson presents a more cogent answer to the question of origin when she notes that in 1926 Mikhail Kaufman made the documentary *Moscow*, a day in the life of the city, a structure which, it seems, influenced both Ruttmann's *Berlin* and Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*. Annette Michelson, op. cit.; p.xxxiv.

³⁵ On the “cinema of attractions” see Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde” in Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker (eds), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (British Film Institute: London, 1990). The quotation is from David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2006); p.2. The absence of people within analyses of the city film is exemplified in Paul Arthur's study of the form in terms of categories and inventories of architectural adornment. See Paul Arthur, “The Redemption of the City” in his *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2005). A similar analysis is undertaken by Scott MacDonald in “The City as Motion Picture” in his *The*

form of individual and collective inhabitants of a city function in association with kaleidoscopic and kinaesthetic depictions of the concrete (buildings, streetscapes) to reinforce what is here called the documentary display of the city film.

In this relation, David MacDougall's term "social aesthetics" draws attention to the role of the body in representation in a way which productively informs understandings of the city film and its capacity as documentary to construct knowledge about the world. As the term suggests, a social aesthetics foregrounds embodiment within what MacDougall identifies as the "sensory and formal qualities of social life". MacDougall applies the original meaning of "aesthetics" – relating to perception by the senses – and in these terms the field of aesthetics is concerned with a wide range of culturally patterned sensory experience through which knowledge is produced.³⁶ Michael Taussig explains this process when he notes that everyday experience (the content of documentary) includes "much that is not sense so much as sensuousness, an embodied and somewhat automatic "knowledge" that functions like a peripheral vision, not studied contemplation, a knowledge that is imageric and senate rather than ideational".³⁷ This section takes up the reference to aesthetics as a form of representation which is located within and operates through a focus on the body and emphasizes the role of such an embodied aesthetic within the documentary display of the city film.

Within a focus on the corporeal, this section will attempt to reassess and review the visual language and formal components of the documentary display of European city films mentioned earlier – the so-called city symphonies. The reassessment of the city film is informed by the analysis of approaches to filming the city's inhabitants, as in the use of concealed cameras in the city symphony. Such a revisionary interpretation of a form which, from its inception, has innovatively combined elements of the avant-garde with documentary representation, points to and reveals the visual capacities of the documentary display which is the productive basis of the city film.

Importantly, the study of the formal and aesthetic components of the documentary display of the city film implies considerations of the historical and political contexts

Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2001).

³⁶ David MacDougall discusses "social aesthetics" in Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor, "Radically Empirical Documentary: An Interview with David and Judith MacDougall", *Film Quarterly*, volume 52, number 2 (Winter 1999); p.7, and in David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2006).

³⁷ Quoted in Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001); p.28.

associated with the form. Michael Renov, one of the few critics to have drawn attention to the connections between the poeticism of the city film and historical and political concerns, interprets the form in terms of a documentary mode of expression. While the documentary tradition contains a number of examples of so-called poetic and expressive works, Renov identifies the city symphonies of the 1920s, among them Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin*, Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*, and Jean Vigo's *A propos de Nice* as works which combine an artfulness derived from the "function of purely photographic properties" with "the possibilities of editing to create explosive effects - cerebral as well as visceral". Renov informs the documentary bases of "the powers of expressivity" of such works by recognising that such a mode of representation is deployed "in the service of historical representation".³⁸ In this way the subtitle of Ruttmann's film was applied to numerous films within which practices of visual kinaesthesia constructed a symphony based on the diurnal cycle of life in the modern metropolis, while simultaneously infusing avant-garde perspectives with a historically- and politically-aware form of social criticism.

Despite the presence of historical commentary and political critique evident within the form, the charges of excessive formalism already mentioned, with its inference of apoliticism and ahistoricism, were frequently levelled at the city symphony. A work as revolutionary – in terms of its Communist ideals and ground-breaking formal innovations – as Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera* was not beyond such criticism. Eisenstein's infamous attack on what he interpreted as the "formalist jack-straws and unmotivated camera mischief"³⁹ of Vertov's film typifies a line of accusation which has been directed at the city film generally. Within this critique the presence of formal experimentation within the city film – a poetics – is said to deny any sense of politics defined as various expressions of power structuring the production of city films. One aspect of this section is a revision of this dominant line of interpretation. Such a revision is undertaken within an analysis of the social aesthetics of the documentary display of the city film, which is historicised here through reference to varying political and historical contexts and filmmaking practices within and through which city films have been produced and circulated.

³⁸ Michael Renov, "Toward a Poetics of Documentary" in Michael Renov (ed.), *Theorizing Documentary* (Routledge, New York, 1993); p.32.

³⁹ Sergei Eisenstein, "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram" in Jay Leyda's *Film Form*, op. cit.; p.43. Vertov, in return, reserved his "sharpest and most aggressive polemic attacks...for the 'art film', that compromised product of aesthetic Menshevism represented most dangerously, in his view, by Eisenstein's work." In: Annette Michelson, "Dr. Crase and Mr. Clair", *October*, volume 11 (Winter 1979); p.32.

Criticisms of the city symphony as a form which displaces politics within its aesthetics have congealed around Ruttmann's *Berlin*, a prominent example of the form. Contrary to the widespread criticisms of the film, the aesthetic strategies of *Berlin* encode a specific political analysis, particularly a politics of gender and class. Indeed, it is through innovative narrative and visual techniques that gender and class are foregrounded within the film's depiction of cosmopolitan Weimar Berlin. One of the central strategies whereby class, gender and other aspects of content are realised in certain city films of the 1930s is through the use of a hidden camera, a practice typically associated with social regulation and surveillance. Surveillance – as a top-down monitoring of people's lives – is here recast, as in the use of a hidden camera in Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*, as a way of displaying the revolutionary reality. In *A Propos de Nice*, Jean Vigo deployed a hidden camera and covert filming to construct a work within which the practices of intellectual montage critically document class differences within the city of Nice.

Avant-Garde Film, Narrative and Gender

The critical interpretations which have functioned to specify features of the city film were advanced through John Grierson's contribution to the process of defining the notion of documentary. Grierson consolidated his thoughts on documentary film in a series of essays he published from 1932 to 1934 in the journal *Cinema Quarterly* under the title “First Principles of Documentary”. Notoriously contradictory and inconsistent in his writings, Grierson presents a unified statement of his early position on the aesthetic, social and political approaches of documentary. Importantly, he referred to the essays as his “manifesto”, a word which evokes avant-garde declarations of creative – and political intent – and one which reinforces the systematic and purposeful elaboration of ideas found in “First Principles”.⁴⁰ Although Grierson was later to revise a number of statements he made in the essays, the work nevertheless stands as an effective and significant summation of his early ideas on documentary forms, including Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), Ruttmann's *Berlin*, and his own film *Drifters* (1929). Grierson insisted that a documentary is organised via the narrativisation of incidents and events and praised Flaherty in this regard for his rigorous story form, structured from and around the actions of individuals. Grierson,

⁴⁰ John Grierson, “First Principles of Documentary (1932)” in Ian Aitken (ed.), *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 1998); p.83.

however, was not entirely supportive of Flaherty's romanticised depiction of the individual. In a 1935 essay, Grierson criticised what he called Flaherty's positioning of his subjects in natural environments in the form of a “man against the sky” approach, preferring forms “of industrial and social function, where man is more likely to be [working in a mine] in the bowels of the earth”.⁴¹ In “First Principles” Grierson praises man, not in the bowels of the earth, but on the deck of a deep-sea fishing boat, as featured in his film *Drifters*, which he presents in the essays as a film which usefully depicts individuals labouring in the modern industrial economy. Ignoring his developing criticisms of Flaherty, Grierson's film includes poetic images of the “high bravery of upright labour”⁴² in scenes of fishermen at work at sea. Grierson acknowledged that the film's subject “belonged in part to Flaherty's world, for it had something of the noble savage and certainly a great deal of the elements of nature to play with. It did, however, use steam and smoke and did, in a sense, marshal the effects of a modern industry”.⁴³ For Grierson, focusing on the individual was a method capable of “cross-sectioning reality” to reveal “complex and impersonal forces”.⁴⁴

Such an interpretation is not, however, extended to Ruttmann's *Berlin*. Grierson found Ruttmann's associational montage – what Kracauer, echoing Grierson, called Ruttmann's cross-section of Weimar Berlin⁴⁵ – wanting in its capacity to produce documentary insights into daily life.⁴⁶ According to Grierson, “In so far as the film was principally concerned with movements and the building of separate images into movements, Ruttmann was justified in calling it a symphony [...] In *Berlin* cinema swung along according to its own more natural powers: creating dramatic effect from the tempo'd accumulation of its single observation”.⁴⁷ Ignoring the film's representation of individuals, Grierson concludes that the visual effects of *Berlin* were “not enough”.⁴⁸ Grierson refuses to admit that it is via the embodiment of human subjects

⁴¹ John Grierson, “Summary and Survey: 1935” in Forsyth Hardy (ed.), *Grierson on Documentary* (Faber and Faber: London, 1979); p.64. Grierson made this comment in 1935. A number of documentary films produced within the context of the British Documentary Movement around that time depicted mine work, among them Jack Holmes's *The Mine* (1935) and Cavalcanti's *Coal Face* (1936). More particularly Grierson was most likely reflecting on *Industrial Britain* (19321-32), a film that he co-directed with Flaherty, which includes a sequence on coal mining.

⁴² Hardy, op. cit.; p.89.

⁴³ Hardy, op. cit.; ibidem.

⁴⁴ Hardy, op. cit.; p.86.

⁴⁵ Siegfried Kracauer identifies a cycle of cross section films in his *From Caligari to Hitler* op. cit.; p.187.

⁴⁶ Hardy, op. cit.; p.89.

⁴⁷ Hardy, op. cit.; ibidem.

⁴⁸ Hardy, op. cit.; p.87.

that the film performs the task of cross-sectioning to expose the forces behind the “daily doings”⁴⁹ of the city. It was through the representation of human subjects that, to paraphrase William Uricchio, the new language of rhythm and evocation through which the city symphony invigorated documentary was informed by a dose of reality and a capacity for social criticism.⁵⁰

This capacity was achieved through an abandonment of the Griersonian representation of people as social types. The form of social critique practised by Grierson in *Drifters*, as with his film criticism in “First Principles”, stereotyped individuality or misrepresented identities – as in his reference to the fishermen in *Drifters* in terms of “high bravery of upstanding labour”, for example. A similar stereotyping or misrecognition of identities infuses criticisms of *Berlin*. Ruttmann's film conveys the accelerating pace of a day in the city through an aesthetic abstraction of shapes and a montage which juxtaposes images within and between scenes. The film's documentary display is fully realised in a combination of these elements within what James Donald has called “an almost voyeuristic record of the little human dramas of public life. Children go to school, people chat in cafés, a policeman helps a little boy across the road, prostitutes ply their trade, street performers appear in silly costumes, a woman commits suicide”.⁵¹ The recognition of the place of people in the film is, however, framed through a false identification of women as prostitutes. The scene which is typically misinterpreted in these terms involves a woman who turns a street corner and looks at a man, who returns her gaze, though the window of a department store.

As Anke Gleber notes, “In [...] criticism of the film by (male) critics, this woman has commonly been considered as a professional one, a woman who goes after her business as a “street-walker””. Gleber points out that Kracauer, writing in 1947, concludes his description of the film's street scenes with reference to “The many prostitutes among the passers-by”.⁵² William Uricchio's analysis is similar: “After

⁴⁹ Hardy, op. cit.; p.85.

⁵⁰ William Uricchio quoted in Scott MacDonald, op. cit.; p.153.

⁵¹ James Donald, “The City, the Cinema: Modern Spaces” in Chris Jenks (ed.), *Visual Culture* (Routledge: London, 1995); p.86.

⁵² Anke Gleber, “Female Flanerie and the *Symphony of the City*” in Katharina von Ankum (ed.), *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1997); p.76. Versions of this essay appear as “Women on the Screens and Streets of Modernity: In Search of the Female Flaneur” in Dudley Andrew, *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography* (University of Texas Press: Austin, 1997); pp 55-85. Susan Buck-Morss argues that male authors have consistently interpreted women in the modern urban context in terms of the figure of the prostitute, in “The Flâneur, The

several shots whose common element involves streetwalkers as a subject, a specific mating instance is presented. A prostitute and potential customer pass one another on the street”.⁵³ Sabine Hake reads the scene differently: “The camera [follows] several young women on the streets by themselves: one as she is being picked up, [...] another as she waits impatiently at a corner, and yet another as she window shops on elegant Kurfurstenddamm”.⁵⁴ Gleber argues that “The striking discrepancies in judging and naming these women might well provoke another look at the function and scenes of the female image in *Berlin, Symphony of the City*.”⁵⁵ Indeed, such a reappraisal could also note that far from lacking a narrative, as a number of critics have claimed to be the case, Ruttmann's film constructs a narrative line around the actions of women in the urban environment. The narrative is enhanced through the woman's unswerving gaze, a sign of the social and political status of women within the liberal Weimar Republic. The suicide of a woman in later scenes, for example, is structured into a narrative concerning the “harsh modern city”.⁵⁶ Gleber notes that the reconstructed scene involving a woman's suicide follows a scene depicting a fashion show in which women parade the latest styles. “A narrative of women's lives is suggested that seems to connect their existence and demise in the city to the ways in which their images are exhibited and exploited in this society”.⁵⁷ In Ruttmann's *Berlin*, display operates largely through a complex representation of gender which is structured into a narrative featuring the so-called rhythm of the city.

The space left within the critical literature devoted to *Berlin* by the marginalisation of

Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering”, *New German Critique*, number 39 (Fall 1986); pp 99-140. Janet Wolff maintains that male authors have generally failed to recognise the ways in which women experience modernity. “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity”, *Theory, Culture and Society*, volume 2, number 3 (1985); pp 37-46. Patrice Petro addresses both the absence and the stereotyping of women in Weimar film and its criticism in *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1989).

⁵³ Quoted in Dudley Andrew, op. cit.; p.67.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Dudey Andrew, op. cit.; ibidem. Gleber refers to an unpublished manuscript by Hake. Hake's argument was subsequently published as “Urban Spectacle in Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of the Big City*” in Thomas Kniesche and Stephen Brockmann (eds), *Dancing on the Volcano: Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic* (Camden House: Columbia, South Carolina, 1994); pp 127-137.

⁵⁵ von Ankum, op. cit.; p.76.

⁵⁶ Kracauer's references to cinema as a mode of production, particularly the Weimar cinema of Ruttmann's *Berlin*, as a “mass ornament” that exploits visual pleasures over cognition is one aspect of the denigration of narrative in Ruttmann's film. Thomas Levin (ed.) *The Mass Ornament* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1988). As in *From Caligari to Hitler*, op. cit., in *Theory of Film* Kracauer decries what he sees as the lack of (narrative) content in Ruttmann's film. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1960); p.207.

⁵⁷ von Ankum, op. cit.; p. 77.

gender was filled to an extent by debate over another category of personal and political identity, that of class. Kracauer lamented the absence of references to class within the “radius” of city spaces plotted in the film. In this way Kracauer asked where “is the Berlin of the worker, the white collar worker, the shopkeeper, the upper bourgeoisie [...] ?”⁵⁸ Friedlander echoed Kracauer when he argued that Ruttmann “should have shown a day in the life of a proletarian or bourgeois from beginning to end”.⁵⁹ The argument is extended by Chapman who, in an analysis of *Berlin* and Cavalcanti's city symphony *Rien que les heures* (1926), contrasts the depiction of city inhabitants in both films. “The city is its people; the people (different kinds and classes) are what make up the fabric of the city. In fact, one could almost go so far as to say that *Rien que les heures* is concerned only with people [...] Cavalcanti is immediately concerned with people as individuals, while Ruttmann is more concerned with people as a mass. The people in *Berlin* are anonymous beings [...] In *Rien que les heures* the people are specific individuals who also serve as symbols for specific types of people.” According to Chapman, Cavalcanti “through his concentration on the poorer classes of people in the city [...] turns *Rien que les heures* into a rather blunt personal statement which compares the mode of life of the wealthy and poorer classes” while in *Berlin* “there is relatively little overt social comment about the various classes”.⁶⁰

Replicating Grierson's arguments, Chapman insists that for Ruttmann “the essence of the city is its rhythm, and nothing else”. For Chapman the editing of *Berlin* produces a “coldness” in the work which “exhibits no real feeling for anything” especially “not the people”.⁶¹ Chapman here reformulates Kracauer's criticism of what he sees as Ruttmann's anti-humanist position. According to Kracauer, “Human beings are forced into the sphere of the inanimate. They seem molecules in a stream of matter [...] People in *Berlin* assume the character of material not even polished. Used up material is thrown away [...] The life of society is a harsh, mechanical process”.⁶² Kracauer agrees with Carl Mayer – Ruttmann's one-time collaborator, who disassociated himself from the film during production, arguing that Ruttmann had abandoned the original

⁵⁸ Quoted in Wolfgang Natter, “The City as Cinematic Space: Modernism and Place in *Berlin, Symphony of a City*” in Stuart Aitken and Leo Zonn (eds), *Power, Place, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film* (Rowman and Littlefield: Lanham, Maryland, 1994); p.220.

⁵⁹ Aitken and Zonn, op. cit.; ibidem.

⁶⁰ Jay Chapman, “Two Aspects of the City: Cavalcanti and Ruttmann” in Lewis Jacobs, op. cit.; p.37 and pp 39-40.

⁶¹ Jacobs, op. cit.; ibidem; p. 40.

⁶² Quoted in Aitken and Zonn, op. cit.; p. 220.

idea of “a film about ordinary people in their normal surroundings”⁶³ – that *Berlin* offers only a “surface approach”.⁶⁴ The reference to “surface” alludes to the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (the New Objectivity) a term used to designate a modern economic order and related stylistic emphasis in the cultural sphere, notably in the form of depictions of machinery, which gave close attention to the shiny – or modern – surfaces of such objects.⁶⁵ Critics on the left charged that the New Objectivity reified aestheticised objects and celebrated the mechanical and mass-produced processes of modernity devoid of human agency. Kracauer espoused similar objections in relation to *Berlin*, arguing that the film's aesthetic formalism was at the expense of political critique.⁶⁶ Kracauer's critical line – one which has been replicated to the point of plagiarism within numerous successive interpretations of *Berlin* – is that Ruttmann's montage mechanises humanity by equating the body with machines. However, beyond a sequence in which images of mechanical toys are cross-cut to images of people on the city's streets, and a brief sequence of a stamping press, the film has only a few shots of industrial machinery. In contrast, Vertov's revolutionary *The Man with a Movie Camera* (a film frequently contrasted to Ruttmann's *Berlin*) includes shots which tend to aestheticise machines.⁶⁷ It is therefore difficult to deduce from shots of machinery alone the incipient fascism that many critics identify in Ruttmann's film.⁶⁸

According to Kracauer, Vertov stresses formal rhythms but without seeming indifferent to content. His “cross sections” are “permeated with communist ideas” even when they picture only the beauty of abstract movements. Had Ruttmann been prompted by Vertov's revolutionary convictions, he would have had to indict the inherent anarchy of Berlin life. He would have been forced to emphasize content rather than rhythm”.⁶⁹ Kracauer here accepts Vertov's “formal rhythms” although he denies

⁶³ Paul Rotha, in collaboration with Sinclair Road and Richard Griffith, *Documentary Film: The Use of the Film Medium to interpret Creatively and in Social Terms the Life of the People as it Exists in Reality* (Communication Arts Books: New York, 1952); p.86.

⁶⁴ Kracauer, op.cit. (1947); p.187.

⁶⁵ Martin Gaughan, “Ruttmann's *Berlin*: Filming in a “Hollow Space”” in Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (eds), *Screening the City* (Verso: London, 2003); p.41.

⁶⁶ Quoted in James Donald, “The City, the Cinema: Modern Spaces” in Jenks, op. cit.; p.87.

⁶⁷ Malcolm Turvey discusses Vertov's representation of machinery in “Can the Camera See? Mimesis in “Man with a Movie Camera””, *October*, volume 89 (Summer 1999), pp 25-50.

⁶⁸ In many cases charges of fascism against Ruttmann are related to the fact that he stayed in Germany during Hitler's rise to power and was recruited to contribute films to Hitler's propaganda projects. Biography is used *ex post facto* as a way of maintaining that Ruttmann's early films reflect fascist concerns. Biography or the mechanical visual metaphor are not as persuasive as clues to an emerging fascism in Ruttmann's work as is *Berlin*'s satirical and scathing critique of the Weimar Republic's liberalism and modernity.

⁶⁹ Siegfried Kracauer, op. cit. (1947); p.187.

similar effects in *Berlin*. It would seem, as Natter comments, “that formalism can be excused in a revolutionary society, while the treatment of Weimar Republic's society demands content (story) and interpretation”.⁷⁰ Kracauer does not recognise that it is possible to interpret Ruttmann's film as a form of display which includes visual rhythm and the prominent inclusion of representations of women and class, thereby metaphorically equating the city, modernity and femininity.⁷¹ Such an approach opens a productive line of comparison between the ways in which films in the city symphony cycle deploy the camera to represent human subjects, thereby implying related political and aesthetic issues.

The Concealed Camera of the City Symphony

As it follows the peripatetic paths of the urban flaneur and flaneuse, Ruttmann's film seems “omnipresent”, as Sabine Hake observes.⁷² A camera capable of capturing the errant and unmotivated gazes of its subjects is an unobtrusive presence in the profilmic scene.⁷³ Indeed much of the footage edited into the film was shot in the streets of Berlin over a one-year period by concealed cinematographers.⁷⁴ Earlier in the century, taking photographs secretly in the urban spaces of New York City and London was a relatively widespread practice conducted “to provide documentation for certain forms of social discourse, as well as journalistic investigation”.⁷⁵ The camera's role at the turn

⁷⁰ Aitken and Zonn, op. cit.; p.220.

⁷¹ James Donald equates the city, modernity, and femininity in Ruttmann in “The City, the Cinema: Modern Spaces” in C. Jenks, op. cit.; p.88.

⁷² Quoted in Anke Gleber, “Female Flanerie and the *Symphony of the City*” in von Ankum, op. cit.; p.76.

⁷³ The term profilmic was introduced in the 50s by a group of French scholars led by Etienne Souriau, as one of a series of eight technical terms which they agreed on in their discussions, of which only two, however, have passed into general theoretical currency – profilmic and diegetic. For further information, see the Preface of Etienne Souriau, *L'Univers Filmique* (Flammarion: Paris, 1953). Diegetic indicates narrative content – as opposed to non-diegetic elements, such as background music. Profilmic was intended to refer to the selected elements of reality – the actor, the decor, etc. – that are placed in front of the camera and leave their impression on the film. The term was paired with the “afilmic”, indicating unselected reality, reality independent of any relation with film; and this is where Souriau included documentary: “A documentary is defined as presenting people and things that exist in the afilmic reality” (Souriau, op.cit.; p.17).

⁷⁴ Stephen Barber, *Projected Cities* (Reaktion Books: London, 2002); p. 32. Barber states that the camera was concealed in a suitcase. Weihsmann comments that the camera was camouflaged in a box which was wheeled along the streets and boulevards. Helmut Weihsmann, “The City in Twilight: Charting the Genre of the “City Film”, 1900-1930” in François Penz and Maureen Thomas (eds), *Cinema and Architecture: Méliès, Mallet-Stevens, Multimedia* (British Film Institute: London, 1997); p. 22.

⁷⁵ Tom Gunning, “Embarrassing Evidence: The Detective Camera and the Documentary Impulse” in Jane Gaines and Michael Renov (eds), *Collecting Visible Evidence* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1999); p.51.

of the century in gathering evidence used in the service of a reformist documentary impulse spurred the relatively well-known photographic work of Jacob Riis. An attenuated version of Riis's motives informed the actions of certain journalists of the day who used so-called detective cameras to surreptitiously take photographs of courtroom proceedings and permeated the activities of street photographers who used hidden cameras to stalk unsuspecting subjects. The prevalence of such practices was reflected in the contemporary concern with the intrusiveness of the camera and a consideration of the new legal right to privacy.⁷⁶

Ruttman's use of a concealed camera draws on certain elements of the documentary impulse which insists on unobstructed access to profilmic reality and also partakes of the motivations behind unscrupulous journalistic conduct. Certainly the ethical questions circulating around the practices of filming secretly have yet to be addressed in relation to Ruttman's film or other works in the city symphony cycle which employ the practice such as Vigo's *A propos de Nice*, a film which rigorously foregrounds its human subjects within its swirling montage. Vigo's outline for the opening of the film emphasises the ways in which the inhabitants of Nice feature within a "kaleidoscopic" burst of images in which panoramic views of the city would be superimposed over images of a roulette wheel and its ball:

The ball skips around. A hand throws in a chip. The ball slows down. A hand slides a chip along the table. The ball slows down. The croupier makes a sign with his finger. The rake pushes the chip back. A hand plays with some chips. The ball slowly skips around. Close-up of ball. Distorted view of the gamblers' faces. Impassive faces of the croupiers. A stack of chips seen in close-up. The rake. The stack of chips seen from a distance. The ball is spun again. The numbers on the green cloth. Travellers leaving the station. Travellers sitting on their suitcases. Commissionaires. Hotel employees. Taxis. Cars. The interpreter. A hotel door opening. Bellboys. A porter hurrying along. A terrace being swept. A restaurant. A headwaiter adjusts his tie. The hotels seen upside-down right themselves. A waiter checking the parting in his hair. A gnarled tree becomes a palm tree. A palm frond. A street cleaner's broom. A wave depositing garbage on the beach. The street cleaner sweeping. The casino on the promenade. A small pile of garbage near the street cleaner. The sea. The broom. The street cleaner leaves, pushing his cart. A view of the promenade desolate and treeless. The beach chairs being set up. The sea. The gulls. The lines of trees. The clear sky.

⁷⁶ Emerging rights to privacy and the deployment of cameras at the turn of the twentieth century are discussed in Gaines and Renov, op. cit.; p. 56, and Robert Mensel, "'Kodakers Lying in Wait': Amateur Photography and the Right of Privacy in New York, 1885-1915", *American Quarterly*, volume 43, number 1 (March 1999); pp 24-45, and Tom Gunning, "Tracing the Individual Body: Photography, Detectives, and Early Cinema" in Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz (eds), *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1995); pp 15-45.

During the filming Vigo realised that he should focus on the beachfront “Promenade des Anglais” and its many bourgeois patrons. Boris Kaufman, Vigo’s cameraman (also the brother of Mikhail Kaufman and Dziga Vertov), filmed such scenes using a camera concealed in a cardboard box or camouflaged on his lap as he sat in a wheelchair pushed by Vigo along the boardwalk.⁷⁷ For Vigo such a filming method was integral to his conception of what he called *point de vue documenté*, an approach predicated on concealment and direct access to subjects.⁷⁸ If people became aware of being filmed Kaufman immediately stopped the camera. Vigo insisted that “social documentary” is achievable only through close attention to individuals in order to reveal, in Vigo’s words, “the hidden reason for a gesture [... To] extract from an ordinary person his interior beauty – or a caricature of him – quite by chance”.⁷⁹ According to Vigo, “conscious behaviour cannot be tolerated, character must be surprised by the camera if the whole documentary value of this kind of cinema is to be achieved”⁸⁰. Vigo’s *point de vue documenté* was, he maintained, a unique way of filming which would reveal social and political conditions within the city of Nice. Vigo emphasised in his comments on the documentary point of view that such an approach was the basis of “social documentary” or “social cinema”, a form of analysis which implies commentary on classes depicted in terms of distinctions between wealth and poverty. Vigo’s “social consciousness” is applied to the specific historical context of Nice to produce a strident social statement which contrasts the lives of the idle rich with the experiences of the working poor. The montage featuring a roulette wheel is suggestive of the theme in its reference to Nice as “a city which thrives on gambling”.⁸¹ Vigo’s Surrealist-inflected politics and the montage of his intellectual cinema are evident in sequences in which wealthy female patrons of Nice’s promenades are intercut with shots of an ostrich, and images of sun-bathers are accompanied by shots of crocodiles lazing in the sun. The critique of bourgeois conditions is extended in the contrast between the scenes featuring wealthy seaside flaneurs and those depicting Nice’s working class quarter. While not as trenchant as the shots of poverty in Cavalcanti’s *Rien que les heures*, Vigo’s film effectively emphasises social distinctions within the juxtaposition of scenes of the leisurely and free-wheeling life of the “Promenade des

⁷⁷ Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo* (Secker and Warburg: London, 1972); p.57.

⁷⁸ Gomes, op. cit.; p. 58, and Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1983); p.77.

⁷⁹ Vigo quoted in Boris Kaufman, “Jean Vigo’s *A propos de Nice*” in Jacobs, op. cit.; p.77.

⁸⁰ Jacobs, op. cit.; ibidem.

⁸¹ Vigo quoted in Salles Gomes, op. cit.; p.55.

Anglais” and shots of the narrow confines of the working district.

Vertov, seeking in a similar way to capture life unawares in his composite Soviet city constructed in *The Man with a Movie Camera*, employed the practice of unconcealed filming through which he produced a revolutionary image, in the dual sense of revolution as innovative and avant-garde and as an expression of the Communist ideals of the Revolution. In places, the film abandons concealed filming within self-referential moments constructed in part through the responses of people within the film to the act of filming. The film includes, for example, a number of scenes in which workers reveal an awareness of the presence of the camera in the form of indirect looks to the camera. The complicity between filmmaker and social actor results in a form of unconcealed empathy with the camera and filmmaker. In other scenes, however, Vertov’s commitment to *Kino-Pravda* (film-truth) is applied through means of filming with a hidden camera. In a valuable interview published in 1979, Mikhail Kaufman, Vertov’s brother and the cameraman on the film, explained the filming method he and Vertov adopted in the film. “The special problem”, argues Kaufman, “was filming people”.⁸²

After an argument between us, Vertov decided to publish a sort of ban ruling out the “kinokina” and temporarily ruling out the subject as an object of filming because of his inability to behave in front of a camera. As if a subject absolutely has to know how to behave! At that time I put it as follows: In the narrative feature one has to know how to act; in the documentary cinema one has to know how not to act. To be able not to act – one will have to wait a long time until the subject is educated in such a way that he won’t pay any attention to the fact that he is being filmed. There’s no school like that yet, is there?⁸³

Vertov supplanted his ban on filming people with a revised approach in which he conceived of the method of secretly filming subjects, a process he interpreted as an ethical component of a class-based mode of filmmaking. The method of hidden filming followed a principle of film-truth that maintained that a camera operator must film people in such a way that he does not impede on a subject’s work – and, by extension the realities of proletarian daily life.⁸⁴ Kaufman and Vertov therefore addressed the problem of people in part within scenes in which social actors achieved this status through the method of film-truth which documents what can be called a subject’s

⁸² Petric, op.cit.; p.81.

⁸³ Mikhail Kaufman, “An Interview with Mikhail Kaufman”, *October*, volume 11 (Winter 1979); p.64.

⁸⁴ Petric, op. cit.; p.82.

“performance of the real” through the use of concealed cameras.⁸⁵ “Following that line of thought”, notes Kaufman,

I constructed a sort of tent, something like a telephone booth, for “The Man with a Movie Camera”. There has to be an observation point somewhere. So I made myself up as a telephone repairman. There weren’t any special lenses, so I went out and bought a regular camera and removed the deep-focus lens. Standing off to the side I could still get things very close up, and that’s why you saw those wonderful faces of the children and of the Chinese magician in “The Man with a Movie Camera”. This method supplied us with material which was more expressive.⁸⁶

In other examples Kaufman refers to practices of distracting people’s attention so that he could shoot “life-as-it-is”. Kaufman emphasises that in these terms the revelation of film-truth produces “totally new and fresh material” which informs the film’s documentary “display of emotions”.⁸⁷

The documentary display of *The Man with a Movie Camera* was not merely based on observation, however. Kinaesthesia as a form of display results from a style of editing conducted to a set of principles which were almost mathematical in their precision. In his 1929 essay “The Alphabet of the Kinoks”, Vertov explains the method whereby shots and scenes function kineasthetically. According to Vertov, the juxtapositional montage of shots must be considered in relation to “(a) the frame’s scale, (b) the pictorial/graphic composition of the image, (c) the shooting angle, (d) the play of light and darkness, (e) the multidirectional motions within the shot, the physical movement of the camera, and (g) the differing speeds of the camera/projector (in order to create an illusion of fast or slow motion on the screen)”.⁸⁸ In Vertov’s approach, this “Kino-eye” – the montage of associated shots – interacted dialectically with film-truth – the ontological veracity of the shot – to reveal or perceive a new, progressive reality hidden below the surface details of experience. The combination of Kino-eye and film-truth vigorously inscribes a form of documentary display which relies on showing, not telling, to achieve aesthetic resolution and a perception of a revolutionary reality.

The indirect acknowledgments of the camera found in *The Man with a Movie Camera* were attended by a “look back” at the camera by subjects in a range of works produced after Vertov’s ground-breaking film, among them a number of city films

⁸⁵ The phrase “performance of the real” comes from John Corner in his discussion of televisual popular factual entertainment, “Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions”, *Television and New Media*, volume 3, number 3 (2002); pp 255-269.

⁸⁶ Kaufman, op. cit.; ibidem.

⁸⁷ Kaufman, op. cit.; ibidem.

⁸⁸ In Vlada Petric, “Vertov, Lenin, and Perestroika: The Cinematic Transposition of Reality”, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, volume 15, number 1 (March 1995); p.16.

made in New York City during the 1940s and 1950s.⁸⁹ New York City films of the mid-twentieth century⁹⁰ were preceded by various nonfictional works from the 1920s and 1930s which depicted the city. *Manhatta* (1921) by Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler is a six-minute ode to urban technology constructed from shots of ferries, skyscrapers and streets in a form derived from the pre-nickelodeon genre of urban panoramas. Panoramas, typically one-take short static vignettes depicting city views of traffic or buildings, also included shots taken with a camera mounted on a moving object, such as a tram, train, subway or ferry. In its focus on the city as technology, *Manhatta* eschews the corporeal. Robert Flaherty summed up the thematic perspective of the film when he pointed out that *Manhatta* is “not a film of human beings, but of skyscrapers which they had erected, completely dwarfing humanity itself”.⁹¹ Flaherty’s own city film *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* (1925) similarly ignored the inhabitants of New York City, thereby contradicting the focus on individual protagonists in his films *Nanook of the North* (1922), *Moana* (1926), *Man of Aran* (1934) and *Louisiana Story* (1948). Jay Leyda’s *A Bronx Morning* (1931) is indebted to the European city symphony in its diurnal passage of time in an urban environment defined as a corporeal space. Comparing *Manhatta* and *A Bronx Morning*, Jan-Christopher Horak notes that Leyda’s film is “more celebratory of the city and also more humanistic in its view of city dwellers”.⁹² Other works from the period, including Irving Brown’s *City of Contrasts* (1931) and Herman Weinberg’s *Autumn Fire* (1933), foreground the inhabitants of New York City as a way of criticising urban conditions.⁹³

The city film can therefore be interpreted from a number of different viewpoints, highlighting the complexity of the genre. This complexity is largely indebted to and is made apparent through the technique of montage whose widespread use across the arts and its extensive theorisation culminated in the theoretical debate raging among the German leftist intelligentsia of the 1930s. The next chapter will attempt to draw a panoramic view of the ideological context which arose around the principle of montage at that time.

⁸⁹ Miriam Hansen notes that a central feature of the early so-called cinema of attractions was “above all, an openly exhibitionist tendency epitomized by the recurring looks of actors at the camera”. Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: “The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology””, *New German Critique*, number 40 (Winter 1987); p.180.

⁹⁰ For example, Francis Thompson’s *NY, NY* (1957) and Rudy Burkhardt’s *Up and Down the Waterfront* (1946), *The Climate fo New York* (1948), and *Under the Brooklyn Bridge* (1953).

⁹¹ Scott MacDonald, op. cit.; p.153.

⁹² Quoted in Jan-Christopher Horak, *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Avant-Garde, 1919-1945* (The University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1995); p.32.

⁹³ Horak, op. cit.; ibidem.

CONCLUSION

The Ethics of Montage

At the time Eisenstein first wrote about the budding American film industry of mass entertainment and describes “the boundless temperament and tempo of these amazing (and amazingly useless!) works”¹, he had already experimented with the practice of montage in his own filmmaking. This statement aptly encapsulates the contradictory tensions that characterise montage whether it is envisaged as a technique, as a practice, or as a product of particular industrial and cultural contexts. While Eisenstein developed montage as a dialectical form of Marxist thought, Griffith's montage structure gave novel expression to *dominant* ideology. And how can we begin to study these forms both for their structural operations of an effective montage principle and, consequently, for their ideological operations – speaking to people in new ways and inducing them to think about their worlds according to radically different concepts of cause and effect? The present thesis studied photography and film within a larger matrix of socially organised communication. Montage was the new organisational principle that was adopted by avant-garde artists in a period when industrial efficiency was still being promoted as a general panacea despite the horrors incurred by war. It was thus inevitable that this ideology of industrial and technological progress would surface in the debate of artists and intellectuals dealing with montage, and an examination of this debate is crucial to a fuller understanding of the practices thus far investigated.

As exemplified by the previous chapters, the artists and practitioners of montage have always reflected on their own practice and yet a critical reflection on the conditions of art and art production, where the technique and philosophy of montage played a central role, was only systematically elaborated in the German left literary circles of the 1930s and further developed by the Soviet theoreticians Boris Arvatov and Sergei Tretyakov. The following chapter will focus on Georg Lukacs, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin and Bertold Brecht whose work epitomises the way montage interpenetrated artistic, social and cultural spheres.² Not only did

¹ Sergei Eisenstein, “Dickens, Griffith and Film Today”, in: Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2004); pp 436-444.

² Literary artists were nonetheless already interested in montage-like aesthetics: in Russia, Meyerhold was already using innovative techniques in his theatrical productions, using such systems as biomechanics, and started collaborating with Mayakovsky from 1917 on *Mystery Bouffe* (later reworked in 1921); and in France, André Breton pioneered the use of automatic writing within the Surrealist movement with his book *Champs Magnétiques* in 1919. One could even argue that proto-montage techniques, notably the use of interruption, fragmentation and scansion, were to be found in early Dada manifestations and in the drawings and texts found in many avant-garde manifestoes. It is thus clear that avant-garde

the main proponents of the debate, such as Brecht and Benjamin, establish strong ties with both cinema and photography through their contact with filmmakers and photo artists, it was also evident that mechanical media played a key role in the theoretical framework that was being developed. They shared a common project in which montage was key: to invest the aesthetic field, from Aristotle through to Kant and Hegel, which had been neutralised for centuries, and to operate (in theory as well as in practice) a Copernican revolution on their theories – thus implying a shift in terminology and the elaboration of new concepts and new categories.

Bloch, Brecht, Benjamin, Lukacs, Gestalt theory and Montage

As previously mentioned, a vociferous debate was articulated around the technique and philosophy of montage in the German left literary circles. Its resonance was in part due to the criss-crossing of intellectual evolution and political destiny between its protagonists. On the one hand, Georg Lukacs, partisan of the mimetic art that was largely inherited from the literary canons of the nineteenth century, ceaselessly decried montage practice as the source of all formalism. On the other, the adversaries of Lukacsian aesthetics asserted that this same montage practice was the insufficient but necessary condition for an operative and productive art.

Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin belonged to the latter category, albeit for different reasons. They both found that the montage work of Bertold Brecht epitomised their theoretical positions. It was thus that, in a chapter of *Heritage of our Times* (1935), Bloch praised Brecht because his use of montage “creates no artistic kaleidoscope but processes fragments of the old society [...] it refunctions them firstly into Communist teaching-machines. The theatre thus transforms itself into a political issue; more precisely, Brecht’s position strives for Leninism in the situations and in the problems which they raise”.³ This first approach was completed a few years later in 1938 by an analysis of Brechtian “Lehrstücke”⁴ which appeared in a new edition of *Heritage of our Times* under the title “A Leninist on the Stage” (1938).

artistic production was converging towards elaborating a structuring principle able to permeate varied art forms.

³ Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of our Times* (Polity Press : Cambridge, 1991); p.226.

⁴ The *Lehrstücke* (“learning” or “teaching pieces”) are a radical and experimental theatrical form developed by Brecht and his collaborators from the 1920s to the 1930s. The *Lehrstücke* use Brechtian epic techniques to create a mode of theatrical performance that has no fixed boundary between actor and audience. With no actor/audience separation, the emphasis in performance shifts to the process rather than the product produced. This eliminates the alienating division within the theatrical apparatus characteristic of bourgeois society between the producer, or artistic labourers, and their means of production. This relation is contradictory insofar as the ownership of the means of production alienates the labour of the artist. Brecht argued that this distinction was no longer operative in the *Lehrstücke*.

There exists between Bloch, Brecht and Benjamin a genuine complicity expressed through a network of concepts and terminology, and particularly through the defence and illustration of montage as a technique and philosophy. It is undeniable that Walter Benjamin's materialist period and its anti-contemplative aesthetic – epitomised by the essay "The Author as Producer" (1934) – is largely indebted to Brecht's epic theatre. Benjamin's theory of montage, cinema and more generally "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) correlates to the tenets of Brecht's famous text on *The Threepenny Opera* (1931). In this text, Brecht meticulously studies the degradation of the "work of art" into a commodity by the capitalist distribution apparatus. The "work of art", traditionally conceived as a unique and irreplaceable expression of the artist destined to "radiate" ("strahlendes Werke"), is completely torn apart by the capitalist organisation and de-fragmented by capitalist industry. When Walter Benjamin talks of the "aura of the work of art" – another form of the "radiating" work of art, as unique and irreplaceable as its author – he echoes in this way Brecht's remarks. On the other hand, however, the film *Kuhle Wampe oder: Wem gehört die Welt?* [To Whom Does the World Belong?] (1932) openly displays the principle of montage – *Kuhle Wampe* is composed of four independent parts separated by autonomous pieces of music during which shots of buildings, factories and landscapes are projected – and can be perceived as an attempt by Brecht to counter the laws of the market that digest the work of art in order to render it palatable and acceptable. The work of art is thus positioned between two opposing forces: it is no longer seen as unique or original, not "radiating" or "auratic", and yet it is being churned out by the market digestibly and palatably. We are now faced with the complexity of a situation whereby art works are polarised and must somehow weave themselves between these two opposing conditions.

As exemplified by *Kuhle Wampe*, Brecht establishes art in the sphere of industry and urbanisation. Technology is portrayed as a tool which should serve the masses in order to attain a state of socialisation, namely through urbanisation and the construction of utilitarian products. Socialisation, on the other hand, will only be reached through the Socialist vision which adheres to such a view of technology. And here Brecht presents us with the three founding tenets of his vision for a new society: technology, socialisation and politicisation – which find themselves perfectly represented through the montage principle.

The zones of outcrop between the two literary left wings during the 1930s are well documented. There was the debate surrounding Expressionism in the literary review *Das Wort* in 1937-1938, which mainly opposed Bloch and Lukacs. Brecht

wrote many essays on realism, formalism and the notion of decadence and kept journals, whose entries dating end 1938 and beginning 1939 no longer hide his violent positions against Lukacs:

literary formalism has not been defined politically either, that is, it has not been defined at all. the good lukacs simple-mindedly derives it from decadence. the literary avant garde are bourgeois decadents, end of story. what one has to do is ignore them and look to the classics. nowhere does he deal with the formalisms of the democracies and the fascist state. (cranking up production – of the means of destruction, liquidating the class struggle, instead of the classes etc.) the decline of narrative is viewed as pure decline. *montage* is viewed as a characteristic feature of decadence. because unity is torn apart by it, and the organic whole dies. naturally one could also make a concrete study of *montage*. (in ivens' film ZUIDERZEE, which shows the reclamation of fertile earth and the parallel destruction of the fruits of the earth in other places.) the other sin is the *inner monologue*. nobody has ever examined this or exposed its actual flaws (you could take the one by the woman in ULYSSES and hitler's from THE SPEECH IN [HEINRICH] MANN'S COURAGE). you would not then have extirpated it root and branch as an artistic device, but presumably shown its flaws in concrete terms. for, of course, as pure empathising this must have gigantic potential for error. there is naturally such a thing as an empty self-generated movement of form, a purely formal satisfaction of real needs, a violation of the facts by generalising treatment etc. but you can also treat formal questions formalistically, and this is what happens in the case of the bold lukacs. according to these marxists [*sic*] this is how matters stand: the bourgeois realists practised an imperfect realism, still had idols; let us forget about these, and everything will be in order. their facts are accepted, and rearranged.⁵

The year 1938 seems to mark a culminating moment in the controversy, although Lukacsian theory had gained popularity since 1931-1932, and grossly corresponds to the rise of Socialist Realism under Stalin. Lukacs repeatedly intervened in *Linkskurve*, the journal of the Union of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers (1929–32), where he developed the first elements of his aesthetics of Gestalt and Gestaltung.⁶ In German, Gestalt means organic form, Gestaltung refers to the process of organisation of form and both denote the notion of an “organised whole”.

By the mid 1920s, many artists – such as Bauhaus artists Wassily Kandinsky, Josef Albers and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy – took an interest in Gestalt theory. One of the reasons why they embraced Gestalt theory was that it provided scientific

⁵ Entry dated February 39, Bertold Brecht, Journals 1934-1955 (Routledge : New York, 1993); p. 21

⁶ The terms are difficult to translate in English. Gestalt psychology was founded in 1910 by three German psychologists, Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler. Wertheimer particularly investigated the conditions that contribute to the illusion of motion in film, an effect technically known as “apparent movement”. From his research Wertheimer concluded that the effect of apparent movement is generated not so much by its individual elements as by their dynamic interrelation.

validation for principles of composition and page layout. A French translation for Gestalt theory is *la psychologie de la forme*. For Lukacs, such an aesthetic of form was defined according to two deviations, which comprised the “naturalism” of *document* on the one hand, and the “schematism” of *trend* on the other. Lukacs here expressed his strong opposition to the double current that was profoundly linked to the mass cultural movement of the end of the 1920s, namely the documentary movement and the agit-prop movement – both having systematic recourse to the technique of montage as if it were of immanent necessity. It thus appears that the question of montage largely overflows the sphere of intelligentsia to which this concluding chapter is devoted. Bloch, Brecht and Benjamin – whom we tend to isolate as a fascinating avant-garde – regaled in the collective spreading of this mass proletarian revolutionary cultural movement; a collective spreading which they aptly recorded, refined and preserved in their writings during the 1930s. We must therefore take them as testimonies of the dawn of a revolution whose momentum was abruptly interrupted. When they posed the formal and technical problems of the avant-garde, it was – contrary to many avant-garde artists – in relation to the emergence of a popular culture implying the productive activity of the masses.

Lukacs saw the relationship between form and content in artistic reflection as a dialectical one, the two completing one another in the individual work of art. In this sense they are of equal importance, and the definition of one cannot go without the other. In his most concise definition of this dialectical relationship, Lukacs accepted Hegel’s view of the subject in saying that content is none other than the “overflow” of form into content, while form is none other than the “overflow” of content into form.⁷ This means that the selection of content is already artistic work. Form alone cannot lend something (just anything) beauty, and content (however carefully selected) does not constitute art if it is communicated to the receiver directly without the mediation of artistic form. It is not insignificant that Lukacs chose to oppose both the documentary and the agit-prop movements. They are in direct rupture with Hegelian aesthetics⁸ – and the *Linkskurve* journal as revolutionary and proletarian directly descended from Hegelian lineage. Both practices saw in montage the adequate technique that was perfectly suited to their function.

⁷ Bela Kiralyfalvi, *The Aesthetics of György Lukacs* (Princeton University Press : Princeton and London, 1975); p.104.

⁸ Hegelian aesthetics describe art as imitation or creation, where true art both embodies and articulates the universal, art is as much subject as it is substance. The artistic process is resolved in artistic fullness.

Lukacs believed that prior to forming the artistic work, the artist executes “preparatory” work, “aesthetic processing” on the raw content that is indispensable and inseparable from artistic work, although in itself it is not yet truly artistic work: “Forming is really the crucial factor, while the aesthetic processing of the content is merely preparatory work, which artistically means very little in itself, because staying with this brings about [...] aesthetically absolutely nothing. This lack of independence [of the preparation of content from forming] however, changes nothing in the primacy of content [...] such an artistic preparation of content is totally irreplaceable from the point of view of the creation of the final, truly artistic form”.⁹ So, while the final artistic value of a work is determined by the success of its form, achieving it would be impossible without the artistic preparation of its content. In its final shape, then, the work of art rises out of life’s contents, because the artistic preparation assures that they remain the foundation, the substance, of the work, thus maintaining its contact with objective reality.

The task of defining form, then, must always include content as an organic part. This artistic form is the “specific, peculiar form of that determined content, which is the content of the particular art-work”.¹⁰ Significantly, this implies that every individual artwork has its own peculiar form. It also implies that form does not (cannot) make something out of nothing; it does not transform the abstract into concrete. It can create “artistic reality from mere possibilities, it can perform qualitative changes on the direct, apparent structure of content”.¹¹ In this way, artistic form can paradoxically become “unfaithful” to particular phenomena of objective reality. Therefore the consideration of totality – the “self-enclosed totality of the work of art” – is important, for it is achieved by means of form: “The artwork – with regard to its content – always gives only segments of reality. The task of artistic forming is to make sure that these do not have the effect of segments torn from totality, the comprehension and effectiveness of which would require us to relate it to its environment in space and time, rather that they have the effect of an enclosed whole which does not require completion by means of external elements”.¹² To extend this into a general principle, Lukacs stated that: “the entire content of the art-work must turn into form, if its true content is to bring about an aesthetic effect”.¹³ The achievement of totality and, through it, aesthetic effect, then, is one role of form in the general composition of the artwork.

⁹ Kiralyfalvi, op. cit.; *ibidem*.

¹⁰ Kiralyfalvi, op. cit.; p.105.

¹¹ Kiralyfalvi, op. cit.; *ibidem*.

¹² Kiralyfalvi, op. cit.; pp 105-106.

¹³ Kiralyfalvi, op. cit.; p.106.

After having established the relationship between form and totality, Lukacs's greatest source of difficulty was coping with the "form-revolutions" of the twentieth century. He realised that during the past several decades a number of radical changes had occurred in artistic forms, exemplified by frequent innovations, and that most of these had been ephemeral. He did not, however, attribute the rapidity of the transformations to changes in fashion and taste, believing that "behind every change in form, however unaware the "revolutionaries" may be of this, there is a hidden change in the content of life".¹⁴ Why, then, were these new forms so short-lived? Lukacs firstly believed that they did not reach deeply into the real changes of life's content, reflecting certain new, but merely surface phenomena of life, catching "only a tiny corner, a little tip, a small splinter of the really new".¹⁵ Secondly, he thought that since there is no search for depth in the preparatory artistic work, all the energy was devoted to a nearly obsessive preoccupation with form alone. The result being that form as such becomes the main feature of most works of art. Lukacs had always rejected the art of any period in which form featured independently from content: "Every form, which enters the awareness of the receiver as form, because it preserves a degree of independence from content and does not overflow completely into the content, must necessarily create the effect that it is, to some extent, the expression of the poet's subjective being and not wholly a reflection of the object itself".¹⁶ Equally, content appearing independently from form may be of significant substance, therefore of great importance, but only as philosophical, ethical or political matter, not as art. Lukacs believed that such contents – as in publicist, propagandist, naturalist works – when claiming to be art, are just as subjective in nature as form appearing independently.¹⁷ Only form can lend such contents aesthetic substance, aesthetic identity. Without artistic form such works are nothing more than the raw contents of sociological and political theories and, as such, they would be more effectively – certainly more objectively – communicated in scholarly essays and articles or speeches.

The convolutions of Lukacs's thought finally bring us to query this opposition to Gestalt and montage. Gestalt can just as well be defined as an occult and discrete montage; and montage as an indiscrete Gestalt, equally displaying the materials used and the technique of its author and thus revealing its politics.

¹⁴ Kiralyfalvi, op. cit.; p.107.

¹⁵ Kiralyfalvi, op. cit.; p.108.

¹⁶ Kiralyfalvi, op. cit.; p.108.

¹⁷ Georg Lukacs, *Studies in European Realism* (The Merlin Press: New York, 1975); p.207.

This notion of “indiscretion” is discussed by Brecht, in an entry of his *Journal* dated 30th March 1947, where he confronts Naturalism to Realism and describes the former as an ersatz of the latter:

<i>naturalism</i>	<i>realism</i>
[...]	[...]
events are supposed to “speak for themselves”	they are helped to become comprehensible
[...]	[...]
social progress is recommended	taught
[...]	[...]
discretion	indiscretion ¹⁸

In another entry dated 17th October 1943, dedicated to the artistic policy of the working classes, he was already up in arms against art that was “as impenetrable as life itself” when he highlighted: “the truth is always in there somewhere, but nobody can get at it”.¹⁹ This critique is supported by a decisive remark on the respective positions of the working class and the bourgeois class towards Realism:

both to win the struggle for power and to keep power, the working class needs realism in thought and deed, and this is nothing special, the bourgeoisie needed realism and still needs it. tattered war reports are harmful for the commanders themselves, and doctored reports on the political situation are harmful to people on the stock exchange. in accordance with their respective situations the bourgeoisie needs secret realistic reports, and the proletariat needs open ones.²⁰

The Gestalt harks back in part to what Brecht understood to be Naturalism – and the choice is between discretion and indiscretion, which reveals a complete political strategy. To evoke the *modus operandi* of organic composition, Lukacs often had recourse to the metaphor of weaving: the work of art spreads out the rich fabric of life. To evoke epic theatre, Brecht used the metaphor of veiling and unveiling. Both claimed to draw from dialectics, but its effect in the sphere of art are not the same according to whether it weaves a network of mediations to symbolise living totality – the “true” relation of man to the world – or whether it unveils what is hidden behind appearances – in particular behind the veil of art.

Lukacs reverts to a discreet strategy of encompassing the reader into the fabric of the novel, and the bourgeoisie in the proletariat; and Brecht to an indiscreet strategy of dividing the spectator from the play (Stück) and the proletariat from the bourgeoisie. Proletarian consciousness cannot be developed insensibly, surreptitiously, and likewise the proletarian revolution does not take over insensibly, surreptitiously, from the bourgeoisie. Living totality is thus shattered.

¹⁸ Brecht, op. cit.; p. 366.

¹⁹ Brecht, op. cit.; p. 305.

²⁰ Brecht, op. cit.; ibidem.

Such was the historical, intellectual and political climate in which Brecht's montage practice unfolded. In the notes to the very avant-garde *Mahagonny* (1927), he opposed with an assertive clarity the aesthetics of montage to the aesthetics of growth [Wachstum]. In other notes to the very classical *Mother Courage and her Children*, he continues to plead for "progression in jumps, that which is inorganic and assembled".²¹ Distanciation [Verfremdung], the alienating technique of epic theatre, is both producing and produced through montage. It is antonymous with perspectival art, which absorbs the reader/spectator. In perspectival art, "everything takes on a natural appearance so that one can no longer jump in through judgement, imagination or any other reaction".²² When Brecht also uses the term *Gestaltung* – which was not foreign to his vocabulary – he makes a radically different usage of the term from Lukacs and uses it to describe the shaping of reality to its crisis: "Reality, complete though it may be, must be transformed by the artistic *Gestaltung*, in order to be recognised and dealt with as something which can be transformed".

Brecht's various studies on Realism and Formalism vividly attest of this orientation, where he indissolubly linked three operations: montage, experimentation and abstraction [Montieren, Experimentieren, Abstrahieren]. According to Brecht (again using Lukacsian terminology), montage must confront the work with the *trend* as much as with the *document*. The document is substantiated because "the homogeneous work is composed of independent parts, which can immediately be confronted to the segments of the corresponding process in the midst of reality".²³ The trend is also evidenced and, far from being amalgamated to fiction through a secret calculation, projects itself: "the calculation becomes theorisation. it does not hold the same position, it cannot be classed among the *reflections of the hero*".²⁴

The three operations – montage, experimentation and abstraction (conceptualisation) – are so indissolubly linked that the first can be seen as the crossing of the last two. Montage is a technique which allows the articulation of thought onto experimentation, to infuse its dialectic dynamically. It is worth noting that Brecht adheres to "classical" alienation – the term has unfortunate resonance, Brecht obviously could not find another – in opposition to "surrealist" alienation whose references are too remote to be recalled – when conceptualisation no longer lends itself to experimentation. Thus defined, Brechtian montage evokes

²¹ My translation, Bertold Brecht, *Materialien zu Brechts Courage* (Suhrkamp Verlag: Frankfurt, n.d.); p.12.

²² My translation, Brecht, op. cit.; ibidem.

²³ Brecht, op. cit.; p.145.

²⁴ Brecht, op. cit.; p.13.

Eisenstein's experiments and Vertov's Kino-Eye. Vertov provides the following definition: "The complex organism of film is not thought out as an expressive totality composed of indifferently interchangeable parts, but as a differential and contradictory structure, so that each shot [...] becomes the shifting and temporary representative of all the others [...] each shot contains all the others, without totalising them: it is [...] the temporary effect of a discontinuous process".²⁵

Just as Brecht distinguishes different forms of alienation, Bloch distinguishes various types of montage in *Heritage of our Times*. "Direct montage": jazz, magazines, spontaneous mosaics; and "montage of a higher order": Expressionism, Surrealism, where reality is perceived in a jumble, where the hieroglyphs of shattered consciousness are perceived. The latter has a destructive force: it fissures, breaks and bores at the smooth surfaces of petit-bourgeois reality. This disintegrating force is nonetheless flawed as it becomes lost in the chaos it has brought on, allowing itself to be recuperated and reintegrated. Bloch boasts the productive force of what he calls "indirect montage", whereby "the montage of the fragment out of its old existence is the experiment of its refunctioning into a new one here".²⁶ The birth of tomorrow's world is experimented in yesterday's and today's worlds. Bloch uses Benjamin's writings to explain that:

Mechanical, dramaturgical, even philosophical montage is certainly not exhausted by more or less rapid refunctioning, i.e. by the use of short disposable models. It is evident in the philosophical cross-drillings of Benjamin, for example, that montage takes its material from much improvisation which would have previously been random, from much emphasised disturbance; it takes intervening means from despised or suspicious forms and from forms which were formerly second-hand.²⁷

More generally, Benjamin abstracts opinions, usages and ideas from their original context and puts them on trial by experiencing them in other concrete situations. What comes out is a didactic (but anti-ideological) game of contradictions, upheavals and gradations. Montage is here the adequate technique to articulate the relation between theory and practice, through the staging of trial and error, of propositions and corrections, of hypothesis and demonstration. Bloch's philosophy in itself is a philosophy of montage, if one takes into account its post-Hegelian side. It attempts to disintegrate the elements of the old culture, chosen from the interests and demands of the present, to assemble them in novel configurations. By taking into account the frozen needs and desires of past culture, it frees the roots of the future that it carries within.

²⁵ My translation, Dziga Vertov, *Articles, journals, projets* (Union Générale d'Édition, Collection 10/18: Paris, n.d.); p.11.

²⁶ Bloch, op.cit.; p.207.

²⁷ Bloch, op.cit.; ibidem.

The later writings of Walter Benjamin seem to echo and supplement the views of Brecht discussed above. This is particularly true in the two essays: “The Author as Producer” (1934) and “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction” (1936). Even today their main ideas largely determine the general image of Benjamin as theorist: first, the inevitable demise of autonomous, “auratic” art due to the development of technologies of mass reproduction qualitatively altering the nature of a work of art. Secondly, there is the “politicization of art”, its transformation into a laboratory of instruction and organization inseparable from an innovatory artistic technique as the requisite radical answer to the dissolution of aesthetic aura. Lastly, Benjamin affirmed the critical, emancipatory potential of mass culture, particularly film. This potential was conferred by the progressive technology and techniques of production.

For Benjamin, the aura – which expresses and substantiates the autonomous existence of the artwork in the period of classical capitalism – is not a consciously created, misleading ideological facade. It is the historically-socially imposed relation of the recipient to the work of art. It is an objective feature of the “collective experience” of art which in this period guides the production of its works, the way they are structured. The collective experience of art equally determines the typical comprehension of works of the more remote past, created under different conditions of production and reception.²⁸ It defines not what a work means, but the manner in which it can mean something for the contemporary public, because the meaning of a work is not some fixed quality inhering in it, but is inseparable from the – historically changing – ways of its reception, and, more generally, from its pre- and post-history.²⁹ The dissolution of aura, associated with the new technical possibilities of mass reproduction, is seen in the context (and as a symptom) of profound changes in the collective apperception of reality in general,³⁰ expressing altered ways of life and new modes of habituation to the

²⁸ “A medieval image of the Madonna was indeed not yet “authentic” [echt] at the time of its making; it became “authentic” in the course of the succeeding centuries and most strikingly so during the last one” (Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeit – alter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (Zweite Fassung)”, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt, 1972), p. 476).

²⁹ “For someone who is concerned with the works [of art] from the standpoint of historical dialectic, they integrate both their pre- and their post-history – a post-history due to which also their pre-history becomes comprehensible as being drawn into a continuous change. The works teach this person how their function can outlive their creator, leaving behind his intentions; how their reception by his contemporaries is a part of the effect which the work of art has upon us today; and how this effect rests not solely upon the encounter with the work in question, but also upon that history which allowed it to come down to our own age”. See Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker”, *op. cit.* (1972); p.467.

³⁰ Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeit – alter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (Zweite Fassung)”, *op. cit.* (1972); p. 503.

world. And the illumination of these connections aims at the awakening of consciousness from the dream-like compulsion of its “natural” way of perceiving the world and endowing it with meaning, a way which is only the unintentional expression of a petrified and reified form of life.

Seen in this broader and, to my mind, more appropriate context, what stands at the centre of Benjamin's philosophical interests is the creation of a new conception and theory of experience.³¹ Through all the changes in the comprehension and realisation of this task, some fundamental continuities remained in his approach. On the one hand, it always entailed a program of regaining “the fullness of the concept of experience of the earlier philosophers”,³² based upon the subject-object paradigm and reducing it to scientific observation, that is, to “the minimum of meaning”.³³ Furthermore, Benjamin conceived this reductive conception of experience as a “singularly temporal” and “temporally restricted” one.³⁴ That is, Benjamin insisted upon the radical historicity of experience, including the organization of sense-perception itself.³⁵ “During long stretches of historical time, with alterations in the entire mode of existence of human collectivity, changes take place also in the mode of sense-perception. The way and manner of the organization of human sense-perception – the medium in which it unfolds – is not only naturally, but also socially conditioned”.³⁶ Benjamin found the key to and model of this changing organisation and mode of experiencing ultimately in language. “Every expression of human spiritual life can be conceived as a kind of language, and this conception implies, in the manner of a true method, new ways of posing the questions everywhere”.³⁷

³¹ Benjamin, “Erfahrung” and “Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie”, op. cit. (1972); pp54-56 and pp157-71.

³² Benjamin, “Über die Wahrnehmung”, op. cit. (1972); p. 35.

³³ Benjamin, “Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie”, op. cit. (1972); p.159. Benjamin here defines his own task as providing “under the typics of antian thought the epistemological founding of a higher concept of experience” which would render “not only mechanical but also religious experience logically possible” (p. 160 and p. 164 respectively).

³⁴ Benjamin, “Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie”, op. cit. (1972); p. 158.

³⁵ It is at this point that Benjamin, originally motivated primarily by metaphysical and religious considerations, finds an unexpected coincidence between his own views and those of Lukacs concerning history as the sequence of alterations in the principles of object-constitution and their corresponding forms of subject-relation. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Benjamin writes in a letter to Scholem: “Lukacs comes, on the ground of political considerations, to such propositions in epistemology which are – at least partially and perhaps not in such a far-reaching way as I originally supposed – either well familiar to me or confirm my views”. 16 September 1924, in: Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno (eds.), *Briefe 1* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt, 1978); p. 355.

³⁶ Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeit – alter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (Zweite Fassung)”, op. cit. (1972); p. 478.

³⁷ Benjamin, “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen”, op. cit. (1972); p. 140.

Experience rests upon a mimetic capacity: the ability to produce and apprehend similarities. Human experience is organised around “non-sensuous” similarities and correspondences, the apprehension of which is made possible by language alone.³⁸ Language, however, is not to be identified with a system of signifiers arbitrarily related – as means of communication – to some signified, externally associated content. This represents only one aspect of language. One can communicate what is meant through language, because the way it is meant is directly and unintentionally expressed, physiognomically revealed in language as the medium of communication.³⁹ Similarly, to understand the intentions of an interlocutor it is not sufficient to comprehend to what his or her words and sentences refer. It is also necessary to grasp the pragmatic force of the utterances, which may be expressed solely in countenance, tone of voice, or manner of speaking. And great historical changes concern primarily not what is experienced and meant, but the way they are experienced and meant: the way the world is perceived and the modalities of meaning socially accepted as appropriate for its characterisation.

What is directly (“magically”) revealed in language cannot be formulated and stated through it. For the contemporaries their way of experiencing meaning is “natural” and takes on the appearance of an ahistorical “ever-same”. And although the ruinous remnants of other pasts, not least in their works of art, are at our disposal, their truth is deposited first of all in those insignificant details which jar our habitual sensitivity.⁴⁰ They are usually assimilated to our own way of perception and receptivity. To free the historical energies of the present, its promise of a radically other future hidden under the spell of the “ever-same,” one needs to “resurrect” the past – not any past, but that which, as its “origin”,⁴¹ discloses an

³⁸ Rolf Tiedemann, *Dialektik im Stillstand* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt, 1983); p. 18. Concerning Benjamin's conception of language, see Winfried Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt, 1980).

³⁹ Benjamin, “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen”, op. cit. (1972); pp141-43; “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers”, op. cit.; pp14-15; “Lehre vom Ähnlichen”, op. cit.; pp208-209ff.

⁴⁰ “The “insignificant” [...] is the inconspicuous, or even the shocking (the two are not in contradiction) which survives the times in the genuine works and constitutes the point, in which the content breaks through for the true investigator” (Walter Benjamin, “Strenge Kunstwissenschaft (Erste Fassung)”, op. cit. (1972); p. 366). And: “The appreciation or apology seeks to cover up the revolutionary moments in the course of history. It has the establishment of continuity at heart. It pays attention only to those elements of the work which already have been incorporated into its after-effect. It misses those points at which the transmission breaks down, thus it misses what is rugged and jagged in it, what offers a foothold to the person who intends to get beyond apology”. (Walter Benjamin, “Passagen-Werk”, op. cit. (1972); p. 592).

⁴¹ On Benjamin's concept of “origin” see Rolf Tiedemann, *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt, 1973); pp76-84 and Gehrard Kurz, “Benjamin: Kritisch gelesen”, in: *Philosophische Rundschau*, number 23 (1976); pp179-80.

affinity with our way of creating and apprehending meaning. In this way, what is the most natural to us appears as strange, and what is alien discloses itself as equally “natural”. This labour of recollection demands, however, not the description and explanation of the past, of what has been, the continuous sequence of dead facts in their totality causally conditioning the present, but the “blasting out” of a past from the continuum of homogeneous time. Out of its fragmentary remnants is constructed a “dialectical image” which makes it able to be literally re-experienced and brings it to sensuous presence [Anschaulichkeit] again.⁴²

Tretyakov, Arvatov and Brecht

It may seem curious to proceed to a theoretical synthesis of authors operating in different historical situations, and although it is true that Brecht on the one hand, and Tretyakov and Arvatov⁴³ on the other, are placed under different historical conditions, and thus bear different influences on their artistic and theoretical practices, their field of intervention nonetheless remains the same: ideological struggles with one specific tool, art.

They pose the same fundamental question: how should an artist intervene in the process of transformation of social relations? The theories of Arvatov, Tretyakov and Brecht⁴⁴ rest on theoretical considerations, in the field of materialism, which posit the place and function of art in a revolutionary process – and formal problems are posed in function of this strategy. These authors also shared the same

⁴² See Walter Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte”, op. cit. (1972); p.693ff.

⁴³ Boris Arvatov (1896-1940) was a polemic theoretician of Productivist art and is very little known in the Western world. He joined the Communist Party in 1919 and was an influential member of the Proletkult in Moscow. He also belonged to the collective around the journal LEF and worked closely with Sergei Eisenstein, Sergei Tretyakov and Vladimir Mayakovsky. For more information, see Christina Kiaer, “Boris Arvatov's Socialist Objects”, *October*, volume 81 (Summer 1997); pp.105-118.

In her excellent study of Constructivism, Christina Lodder has provided the fullest English-language account of Arvatov's ideas, as well as brief biographical sketch. See her *Russian Constructivism* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1983).

⁴⁴ The theories are closely linked. It is worth mentioning that the relations between 1920s Germany and the young Soviet Republic are manifold: intellectual, political and economic in a certain way, too. In 1922 in Berlin, the concentration of intellectuals and Russian artists – and they are not all refugees – is astounding. As early as 1924, Brecht knows, through his contacts with Asja Lacis, with much precision the innovations of Soviet stage directors and Meyerhold in particular. Asja Lacis will also play a decisive role in the political evolution of Walter Benjamin when they meet in Italy in 1924. In 1931, Tretyakov goes to Germany where he will stay for several months. On 21st January he gives a conference in Berlin on The Writer and the Socialist Village, published in extenso in the journal *Freies Deutschland*.

Does this mean that one should locate in Brecht's theory all that was influenced by the Soviets? The parallels between Brecht and Tretyakov and between Brecht and Arvatov are infinite, but without interest in terms of a search for influences. These theoreticians and artists took part in the same questioning of cultural heritage. The history of ideas must not be thought in terms of private property, but in terms of dialectical relations and interactions which reinforce convergences and favour overlap.

adversaries: the bearers of fixed aesthetic norms, ahistorical and adialectic. Their primary task is to revolutionise the aesthetic field, which was neutralised for centuries spanning Aristotle to Hegel, and overturn all its terms, elaborate new concepts and new categories. This upheaval was operated polemically:⁴⁵ Arvatov and Tretyakov struggle against bourgeois aesthetic theories – a mixture of non dialectic idealist and materialist elements – and the practices which stem from them; Brecht fights on two fronts: on the idealist front (old bourgeois aesthetic) and, on the same front as his friend Tretyakov, namely a reductive conception of art (as mere reflection of social reality).

In these struggles, the category of montage played an essential role. In the Soviet Union and Germany during the 1920s and 1930s, the technique of montage came under attack and was denounced as formalistic. Consequently, two approaches emerged: a montage aesthetic and an anti-montage aesthetic. Still in 1950, the photomontages of John Heartfield were labelled as formalistic in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) where the theses of Lukacs prevailed, and as mentioned earlier Lukacs saw in montage a product of bourgeois decadence. The aesthetic field thus emerged as the locus where two trends, which both claimed to stem from historical and dialectic materialism, confront one another. Was the struggle for or against montage not symptomatic of a wider struggle, played out elsewhere? Should we not question this symptom in order to grasp its meaning?

Generally, the term montage designates a technique – in that sense montage becomes synonymous with process, means, instrument, practice [praktische Angelegenheit (Brecht)] – and, as discussed in chapter 4, the English term *cut* and the German term *Schnitt* used in cinematic terminology make montage out to be a mere technique of cutting. This use of the term also tends to shadow the ideological stakes of the technique: there is no pure technique, as it is always a mediation between the material and the ideological (Benjamin). It then becomes necessary to discuss montage as *technique* and as *category*. Montage is a *technique* which is infinitely varied, namely a unit which allows to designate the artistic object as a constructed object whose inner workings can thenceforth be analysed; montage is also, as we shall see, a *category*, a unit of philosophical discourse whereby the aesthetic field is here considered as a form of philosophical discourse and a component of all philosophical theory;⁴⁶ montage is a *concept*. Most of the time, these two levels are interwoven. When Brecht opposes montage to growth

⁴⁵ A binary structure of opposition can be found in Tretyakov's theoretical texts and even more so in those of Boris Arvatov. They constantly highlight the close links that aesthetic ideologies of power in the making have with traditional aesthetic theories.

⁴⁶ See Alain Badiou's distinction between notion, category and concept, Alain Badiou, *Le concept de modèle* (Maspéro: Paris, 1972); p. 13.

[Wachstum] the term designates a theoretical element of epic theatre and a technique whose aim is to break the linearity of the text, of the writing, to shatter the unity of the character, to produce caesurae (Bloch) – in brief, to destroy the harmony of a closed system and the ideology which it implies. For Boris Arvatov, category and technique are intertwined. In the few texts of Arvatov that are accessible, the category of montage dominates, in those of Brecht and Tretyakov the term sometimes designates a technique, sometimes a category, sometimes even both are superimposed. Eisenstein only talks of the technique of cinematic montage while referring to the general principle of montage⁴⁷, a category. Generally, in the theories and practices of militant art, the techniques of montage aim to produce ideological effects and are always to be reinvented. In times of intense struggle, theoretical and material practices are intimately linked, theory commands practice and vice versa, and this explains why the distinction between these two categories is often delicate but nonetheless indispensable.

The Category of Montage

The following section will deal with the notion that montage is a category, a unit of philosophical discourse, as mentioned above. Montage is not a subversive category *per se*, rather it is part of the new lexical field which has invested aesthetics since the beginning of the twentieth century – and which has more or less radically subverted it depending on the time and place. The category of montage is a theoretical element which makes up an aesthetic under construction in the material field, an aesthetic which has brought a number of unresolved, even unknown, issues which have transformed the mode of production and the mode of consumption of the object – the category of montage is anti-idealistic. Finally, it is a theoretical tool that denounces the underlying idealism of Marxist aesthetic theories for which art is the mechanistic⁴⁸ reflection of reality – the category of montage is thus anti-naturalistic and anti-realistic.⁴⁹

As previously mentioned, the category of montage is thus an anti-idealist

⁴⁷ See Eisenstein essay “Montage 1938” in: Michael Glenny and Richard Taylor (eds), *SM Eisenstein Selected Works. Towards a Theory of Montage*, volume 2 (BFI Publishing: London, 1991); pp296-326.

⁴⁸ “Mechanistic” which means treating nature, including living systems, as machinery, obeying fixed laws and tending to explain phenomena only by reference to physical or biological causes.

⁴⁹ “Realist” in the usual sense of a reflection of reality with maximum verisimilitude. Roman Jakobson has demonstrated how imprecise, polysemous and illusory this term is. In 1921, Jakobson pointed to a central feature of any discussion of realism: avant-gardes were forever breaking with the established codes of realism – to which the conservatives held as a rule – in the name of a greater realism which their art provided. See Roman Jakobson, “On Realism in Art” in: Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (eds), *Readings in Russian Poetics*, (MIT Press: Cambridge, 1962).

category which subverts the aesthetic field: it operates a mutation – not simply a variation – since it implies an irreversible process.⁵⁰ The term “montage” harks back to the notion of production, to produced or fabricated products. It is borrowed from the sphere of economics and depicts manual labour. It has referents such as “labour”, of “working” as organisational process. The term “montage” thus describes a fabrication process as well as a structuring process. Its usage consequently discards whole aspects of traditional aesthetics and marks a rupture with aesthetic vocabulary. It allows for both the theorisation of the artist’s work and the relation of this work to the material(s) used. To cite Arvatov: “One cannot build unless one knows the material one starts from. This is why proletarian theatre will have the following fundamental principle: the constructive organisation of the dynamics of the material in accordance with ever-new tasks”.⁵¹ The artist-creator solely dependent on his imagination and invention make way for the artist-producer dependent on the material he assembles, deconstructs and transforms whose effects remain unpredictable. This artist-producer is thus necessarily an experimenter. Traditional aesthetic theories describes in much detail the status of the artist-creator and the status of the original object (the originality which determines its market value), while the relations subject-object-material-technique – the material practice as transformation process – have been totally occulted.

The constructed, assembled artistic object can thus become the object of systematic analysis – analysed as a “system of meaning” and as a set of relations between material elements. The artistic object no longer is the product of a mysterious power – imagination, intuition, inspiration – nor is it the simple reflection of a being whose subject would be the mirror: the object is now the product of a practice. The term “practice” immediately conjures up the transformation of materials with historically determined tools by a subject himself rooted in history – or, thereby transforming the transformation process and/or being transformed by it. The relation between form and content – montage labelled as formalism – is no longer external – form defined as a piece of clothing that could fit over any content – it becomes a process, an elaboration, the outcome of “labour”, of “working”. The concept of form takes on new meaning, or more precisely the traditional opposition between form and content is if not annulled, at least displaced. Form is attained during the process of structuring material elements, while function still plays a determining role in the process of

⁵⁰ See Thomas Herbert, “Pour une théorie générale des idéologies”, *Cahiers de l'Analyse*, number 9 (Summer 1968).

⁵¹ Boris Arvatov, “Otrazati”, podrazati’ ili stroit’?” (Refléter, imiter ou construire ?), *Gorn* 1, number 6, 1922, pp107-110.

organisation [Gestaltung].

Its use also annuls the ideological opposition between economic labour, which produces quantifiable riches, and the “non-labour” of the artist. The world of art belongs to games, gratuity, leisure, without any relation to the world of labour, the locus of restriction, seriousness, yet without effect on the world of productivity and power. Arvatov rightly points out that with Marx, art is considered as labour, a practice among other practices; it is a specific form of appropriation of social reality and a means to transform it.

Let us now look further into the lexical field of the term “montage”. At the paradigmatic level, the term montage is related to many others: assemble, build, join, unite, add, combine, link, construct and organise. The two last terms being the most commonly used to refer to montage by such artists as Brecht, Tretyakov, Arvatov, Eisenstein, Vertov, Hausmann, Höch and Heartfield. They bear relation to the same referents: “labour” and “working” as organisational process. At the syntagmatic level, the term “montage” is associated to other terms, whose set constitutes the main semantic axes of this new aesthetic field. Montage is associated to terms borrowed from the scientific sphere and industrial technique. Arvatov massively quotes industrial technique and it is the source of all his metaphors in his text “Art and the Organisation of the Environment” (1926) where he writes: “Productivists defend the principle of artistic engineering”, and opposes the art of the easel to the “standardised montage” of functional products. Artistic institutions (schools, theatres, etc.) become “technical laborator[ies]”⁵² and “factories”⁵³ – another important category which does not designate a specialist, but a qualitatively different being able to walk, receive, love; a non-mutilated being conscious of his poly-dimensionality.

The artist thus becomes producer (Benjamin, Brecht, Arvatov, Tretyakov), a *monteur* of life (Arvatov), an engineer (Höch, Hausmann, Heartfield, Arvatov),⁵⁴ an experimenter. Brecht uses his three tenets – montage, experimentation and abstraction – to define the function of the *Lehrstück*. Like the scientist, the artist is a producer of knowledge; like the technician, he produces functional, usable

⁵² Boris Arvatov, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question)”, *October*, volume 81 (Summer 1997); p. 126.

⁵³ Arvatov, op.cit.; ibidem.

⁵⁴ The widespread use of technical vocabulary is typical of Soviets, the Germans pose the relation art/science in more philosophical terms and always underline the specificity of artistic practice. The fetichisation of industrial practices lead to the overvaluation of technical rationality at the detriment of artistic ends. Due to the industrial underdevelopment of the Soviet Union, the danger of such a position could not have been avoided.

objects.⁵⁵ Tretyakov offered to “shape life by producing useful things for social construction”⁵⁶, Arvatov attempted to set up an aesthetic of social and technical utilitarianism,⁵⁷ Brecht transformed “theatrical writings and representation into a mode for the art of philosophising [...] most often practised by the lower social classes [...] It is of a most practical interest, entirely based on utility [...] And if utility has anything prosaic, then we will have [...] to renounce being poetic rather than renounce being useful”.⁵⁸

Works of art are no longer considered as such because of their originality, their attachment to high culture, only to be seen in closed ideological spaces (museums, galleries, schools, etc.); they have now become reproducible and useful for workers. Arvatov “challenged the validity of easel art and promoted the “productivist” view that artists should enter directly into industry to produce formally expedient and socially useful objects.”⁵⁹ Art is no longer consumed passively and contemplatively, it is consumed collectively and actively, itself considered as an inevitable transitory form as long as social relations, which rest on the division of labour, subsist. In turn, the opposition between art and science finds itself annulled since, in the old world order, power belonged to the sphere of knowledge. Thenceforth, scientific practice and artistic practice become practices of the appropriation and transformation of social reality.

The term “montage” is also associated to terms that belong to the military sphere. The artist is a combatant on the Front of Art: he destroys, knocks down, burns, ruins and so on. This list is inexhaustible, military metaphors abound: art is a weapon (Heartfield). This semantic axis resonates strongly in the writings of Brecht, Tretyakov, Arvatov, but also Mayakovsky and Heartfield, whose primary function is to *deneutralise* the aesthetic field.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ In 1925, George Grosz and John Heartfield noted in “Die Kunst ist in Gefahr” that in Russia “the artist is the mediator, the recruiter for industrial ideas”, that an artist is also “a student in technique”, and that the Academy of Arts teaches “static and dynamic”. In: Dieter Schmidt, *Manifeste, Manifeste 1905-1933*, volume 1 (VEB Verlag der Kunst: Dresden, 1965); pp345-346.

Productivists, Constructivists and Futurists strove to combine art, science and technique at a time when economic labour itself tended to be organised scientifically. The term “organisation” is a key word in all discourses (political, economic, ideological, theoretical) in a country led asunder by war, years of civil war and the blockade.

⁵⁶ Felicie Pastorello, “La Catégorie du montage chez Tretjakov, Arvatov, Brecht” in: Table ronde internationale du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Collage et montage au theatre et dans les autres arts durant les années vingt (La Cité – L’Age d’Homme: Paris, 1978); p. 121.

⁵⁷ Boris Arvatov, op.cit.; p.123.

⁵⁸ Bertold Brecht, *Ecrits sur le théâtre*, volume 1 (Ache: Paris, 1972); pp248-249.

⁵⁹ Kiaer, op. cit.; p. 106.

⁶⁰ Even the bourgeoisie uses art in its political struggle, but at a theoretical level the aesthetic field remains neutralised. This neutralisation, as theorised by Kant and

The term “montage” in French is associated to its antonym “démontage” [disassemble]. *Montage/démontage* is an indissociable entity: the *montage* of functional objects calls for the *démontage* of psyche to take place and make room for a new *montage* of life with reinvented, appropriate methods. For Arvatov, Tretyakov, Brecht and Mayakovsky, the artist is a psycho-engineer, a psycho-technician who attempts to disassemble [*démonter*] psychic structures (the subjective basis for social change) in order to promote a new organisation of the perception of the world and thus a new organisation of life.

Christina Kiaer describes how Arvatov characterised the montage of such functional objects: “Portable and flexible, ready to be assembled or disassembled on short notice, these objects respond formally to the newly collectivized everyday life of the technical intelligentsia, in which the borders between everyday life and production are fluid, and objects circulate between them.”⁶¹ Arvatov, like his contemporaries, clearly associates montage to antithetical denominations: portable/flexible, assembled/disassembled. The less commodified everyday life of the Western intelligentsia leads to demand the new values of activity and flexibility for objects described above. Under Socialism, these values would eventually come to define the values of Socialist objects. In contrast to the display or status value of Bourgeois objects, or the stationary, decorative forms – here Arvatov doubtless had in mind the draperies, heavy furniture and coverings of the Bourgeois home. These utilitarian objects now respond to new criteria of value which are “convenience, portability, comfort, flexibility, expedience, hygiene and so on – in a word [...] its suitability in terms of positioning and assembling⁶² for the needs of social practice”.⁶³

Such utopian vision is omnipresent in the writings of the Soviets since these “producers of art” aimed to produce deconstructive ideological effects on consciousness. Do these “montageurs of life” not announce the advent of a humanity in control of its development? In effect, for Arvatov, Brecht, Benjamin and Tretyakov, the artist as “art professional” in particular can only be seen as the product of a system based on the division of labour: hence art for all does not mean a democratised access to art by the greater number in order to entertain the

ontologically established by Hegel, continues to nourish western thought and still haunts Marxist aesthetes.

⁶¹ Kiaer, op. cit.; p. 114.

⁶² The phrase “suitability in terms of positioning and assembling” [*ustanovochno-montazhnaia*] uses two key terms from the Constructivist lexicon, *ustanovka* meaning *positioning* and *montazh* meaning *montage*. For an analysis of *ustanovka*, see Maria Gough, “Switched On: Notes on Radio, Automata and the Bright Red Star”, in: Leah Dickerman (ed.), *Building the Collective: Soviet Graphic Design, 1917-1937* (Princeton Architectural Press: New York, 1996).

⁶³ Arvatov, op.cit.; p.126.

proletariat after working hours (art as scapegoat), rather it should enable everyone an active appropriation of art.

From Instrument of Enlightenment to Totalitarian Propaganda

In 1921, Alexander Rodchenko describes his reasons for abandoning painting:

Thenceforth the picture ceased being a picture and became a painting or an object. The brush gave way to new instruments with which it was convenient and easy and more expedient to work the surface. The brush which had been so indispensable in painting which transmitted the object and its subtleties became an inadequate and imprecise instrument in the new non-objective painting and the press, the roller, the drawing pen, the compass replaced it.⁶⁴

As aptly described by Rodchenko, the introduction of industrialisation and social engineering led many avant-garde artists to transform their aesthetic thought. It was thus that the essential concern for a self-reflexive pictorial and sculptural production was abruptly abandoned after 1920. As early as 1916, Tarabukin describes this shift: “the form of a work of art derives from two fundamental premises: the *material* or medium (colours, sounds, words) and the *construction*, through which the material is organised in a coherent whole, acquiring its artistic logic and its profound meaning”.⁶⁵ It was thus that a crisis of representation took place, whereby the new Russian society following the socialist revolution, demanded the recognition of the actual processes of production. Walter Benjamin fittingly describes the fact that industrialisation led artists to transform their aesthetic thought. The particular historical and cultural contexts in which the technique of montage evolved allowed the *art* object to become *artefact*, since the technological and mechanical advances allowed artists to break from the age-old criteria which had governed art thus far. Arvatov provides a very useful account of this gradual shift from *art* to *artefact* and the utilitarian aesthetic of the Russian avant-garde:

The first to retire were the expressionists, headed by Kandinsky, who could not endure extremist pressure. Then the suprematists headed by Malevich, protested against the murder of the sanctity of art, since they were convinced of the complete self-sufficiency of art. They could not comprehend any other form of art production but that of the easel [...] In 1921 the Institute for Artistic Culture, which had once united all the left artists, broke up. Shortly thereafter the Institute started to work under the banner of productivism. After a long process of selection,

⁶⁴ Alexander Rodchenko, exhibition pamphlet at the Leftist Federation in Moscow, cited in Benjamin Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography”, *October*, volume 30 (Autumn 1984); pp 82-119, p.89. Buchloh mentions this took place in 1917, but in fact Rodchenko’s text dates from 1921 according to Selim Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko* (MIT Press: London, 1986); p. 293.

⁶⁵ Nikolai Tarabukin, *le dernier tableau* (Editions Le Champ Libre: Paris, 1972); p. 102 quoted in Buchloh, op. cit.; p. 87.

after an obstinate fight, the group of non-representational constructivists crystallized within the group of the Left (Tatlin, Rodchenko, and the Obmochu-Group), who based their practice on the investigation and treatment of real materials as transition to the constructive activity of the engineer. During one of the most important meetings of the Inchuk a resolution was passed unanimously to finish off with the self-sufficient constructions and to take all measures necessary to engage immediately with the industrial revolution.⁶⁶

The introduction of montage techniques thus seems to have functioned as a transitional phase in the criticism of the conventions of representation, which in turn brought about a rising awareness of the need to construct iconic representations for a new mass audience. The way in which artists engaged in using photographic images at precisely the same time mimetic representation had been dismantled and finally abandoned seems essential. As Buchloh states “[t]hese techniques seemed to have generated, in the dada context, the extreme procedures of juxtaposition and fragmentation by which the origins in advertising were invested and where the constructed artificiality of the artifact destroyed the mythical nature of the commodity [...] as well as the actual indexical structure of the agglomerated fragments of the photomontage itself [...]”.⁶⁷ Photography and photomontage (as well as film), because these media are conducive to mass production and consumption, thus became the focus of artistic procedures, as exemplified in the following text by Lissitzky:

As a result of the social needs of our epoch and the fact that artists acquainted themselves with new techniques, *photomontage* emerged in the years following the Revolution and flourished thereafter. Even though this technique had been used in America much earlier for advertising, and the dadaists in Europe had used it to shake up official bourgeois art, it only served political goals in Germany. But only here, with us, photomontage acquired a clearly socially determined and aesthetic form. Like all other great art, it created its own laws of formation. The power of its expression made the workers and the Komsomol circles enthusiastic for the visual arts and it had great influence on the billboards and newspapers. Photomontage at its present stage of development uses finished, entire photographs as elements from which it constructs a totality.⁶⁸

The category of montage designates a practice that implies an active subject operating certain choices (whether conscious or not) on materials and techniques in order to produce ideological, aesthetic and political effects in a given historical situation. Montage is an act (and not a way of seeing), an act of interpenetration of reality. Indeed, John Heartfield diverted photographs of Nazi propaganda using the

⁶⁶ Boris Arvatov, *Kunst und Produktion*, translation by Hans Günther, Karla Hielscher and Reine Hanser (Hanser Verlag: Munich, 1978); p. 43.

⁶⁷ Buchloh, op.cit.; p.103.

⁶⁸ El Lissitzky, “The Artist in Production”, *Catalogue of the Graphic Arts Section*, Polygraphic Exposition of the Union of Republics (Moscow, 1927).

technique of montage to create a determining moment of political misappropriation – the same also applies to the manipulations of the mass media. Similarly to the technician or the scientist, the artist assembles his object – he does not reproduce reality. The artist thus operates a deconstruction of reality whereby reality is no longer totality but fragments. The term “montage” has often been associated with the term “dialectics” precisely because the practice of montage establishes relations – whether convergent or contradictory – which multiply the levels of representation and interpretation. Montage shatters the linearity of meaning and its underlying ideologies.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, many artists portrayed admiring views of industrialisation and mechanisation processes. Artists were hopeful that new feats of engineering would enhance life. The Futurists, who despised the political and artistic traditions of the past, espoused a love of speed and technology. They naturally embraced the car, the plane, industrialisation and urbanisation because they represented the technological triumph of Man over Nature. Fernand Léger, too, was famous for praising the efficiency and precision of machine parts. It has now become evident that such optimism about industrial progress and technology blinded many avant-garde artists in recognising that the creation of conditions which promoted the collective reception of the masses would very soon provide totalitarian regimes with powerful propaganda tools. In reaction to the painful absurdities of the First World War, many Surrealists saw science and technology as the expression of a total failure. These Surrealists did not partake in the widespread idolatry of machines and technology; instead they viewed science as arrogant. The monstrous uses technology had been made to serve were only confirmed in the break out of the Second World War. Picasso’s celebrated *Guernica* (1937), for example, stands as a symbol of the ruthlessness, violence and destruction of war and its underlying technologies.

The fate of montage is exemplary of the contradictions at play in the way it was used by avant-garde artists, propagandists and advertisers alike. Indeed, the technique of montage provided the aesthetics and technology necessary for the propagation of the ideals of the Stalinist, Italian Fascist and German Nazi regimes. Later still, the immediate consequence of new montage and photographic techniques were to be observed in American advertisement campaigns for the acceleration of capitalist development through consumption. The aesthetic debate surrounding montage was thus tragically recuperated for commercial and ideological purposes. Montage aesthetics moved from being an instrument for political emancipation, mass education and enlightenment to a frighteningly

powerful tool for totalitarian propaganda, as well as an extremely successful ideological apparatus for the Western capitalist culture industry. The seeds of the deeply subversive deconstruction of traditional principles of art also became the seeds of its opposite, through propaganda – whether for political or commercial purposes.

And yet, the fragmentary nature of photomontage has remained subversive in its use in the sphere of art since the 1930s. Montage techniques have continued to be used in experimental filmmaking: in structural cinema and photogrammic serialisation by Ernie Gehr, Rose Lowder, Malcolm LeGrice, Michael Snow, Paul Sharits and Peter Kubelka; in artists who work directly on, or with, the cinematographic medium like Stan Brackhage, José Antonio Sistiaga, Carl Brown, Pierre Rovère, Hy Horsch, Cécile Fonaine and Marcelle Thirache; in the montage films of found footage by Martin Arnold, Matthias Müller, Cane Capovolto and Gustave Deutsch; and finally in the area of expanded cinema (installations, multi-screen projections, performance, etc.) with Carolee Schneemann, Robert Whitman, Holis Frampton, Vivian Ostrovsky, Yann Beauvais and Miles McKane. To this non-exhaustive list must be added the films that evoke body art and performance (Kurt Kren, Valie Export and Bertrand Berrenger), along with contemporary visual artists whose practice is closely related to experimental cinema (Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Pierre Alferi and Christophe Girardet). The artists listed above use the medium of film, and the technique of montage, in order to expose diverse and frequently hostile audiences to the myriad subversive potentials of the medium. The use of the montage technique has persistently remained seditious as it is often aimed at exposing corrupt and destructive attitudes and practices whether political, social, historical or cultural. It has also been used to overcome the profilmic illusions of cinema, as in the works of Henry Hills (*Mechanics of the Brain*, 1997; *Emma's Dilemma*, 2005; and *Electricity*, 2007). His use of extremely condensed and relentlessly focused montage subverts the intention of seamlessness: altering speed, direction, orientation, density, colour and employing repetition with or without variation. Shots are placed in reverse order and decontextualised to identify fragments in order to juxtapose and refine. The internal montage of the film thus takes control and leads the viewer.

The use of montage in photography has also remained deeply subversive, namely through the shrewd eye of Barbara Krüger who has always questioned the representations and dynamics of power. She uses photographic (and now filmic) material which she layers with aggressive captions. In their trademark bold letters



Fig. 68 *I Shop Therefore I Am*, Barbara Krüger, 1987



Fig. 69 *Your Body is a Battleground*, Barbara Krüger, 1989

over a red background, some of her slogans state “I shop therefore I am” (Fig. 68), “Money can buy you love” and “Your body is a battleground” (Fig. 69). Her works question the viewer about feminism, consumerism, individual autonomy and desire, as Krüger states: “I try to question the seemingly natural appearance of images through the textual commentary which accompanies them”.⁶⁹ Her found photographs are often taken from mainstream magazines that sell the very ideas she is challenging. Krüger thus dismantles capitalist discourse from within by using its potent tool: montage. It is clear that Krüger is fully aware of the politics of art in the age of mechanical reproduction: her use of photomontage is radical, confrontational, agitational and evidently influenced by Benjamin’s theorisation of montage. Krüger destroys a certain order of representation whereby she carries out a political displacement of the traditional/dominant mode of representation. She accomplishes this task through reappropriation: the radical and critical transformation of someone else’s image. In this process of critical reappropriation, Krüger creates a new hierarchy and non-synchronous relations between the “male view” of her images and her “female” captions. She thus challenges not only the dominant mode of representation but also the dominant ideology (bourgeois/patriarchal/sexist).

Despite the striking heterogeneity in the historical, cultural and stylistic contexts of the cinematic and photographic practices mentioned above, they all use the technique of montage to undermine the linearity and continuity of their mainstream equivalents, in order to retain the spectator for a more attentive and reflective reading of art. As demonstrated throughout this thesis, montage is endowed with great subversive potential. Montage takes on this function because of the realistic (or indexical) nature of the photographic image, and this process calls attention to the process of naturalising the ideology it heralds. It is as if montage helps one to see both the present image and its deep immersion in a system of representation. It is precisely the duality of this perception that helps empower viewers as active participants capable of resisting closed readings and perceiving the traces of collective history and dominant ideology.

⁶⁹ Barbara Krüger, “Work and Money” in: Krüger, *Money Talks* (Distributed Art Publishers: New York, n.d.); p.75.

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